



Kentucky's Public Schools: The Heartbeat of the Community

When meeting someone for the first time, it's pretty common to ask the person's name and maybe what they do for a living. Then, almost without fail, the next question is, "Where are you from?" If you recognize their hometown, it's followed by, "Where did you go to high school?" In Kentucky, our public schools are the foundations of our communities. They become a vital part of our identities – part of the fabric of who we are. Community schools contribute so much more than an education – to students, families, and even those without school-aged students. They are the place where future citizens spend their formative years, and as such, they often become the heartbeat of the area.

David Young, CEO at Central Kentucky Educational Cooperative, sees proof of this on a daily basis. He works directly with the superintendents and staff of 21 districts who are a part of CKEC. As an advocate for public education, he believes that public schools are community builders and opportunity equalizers. "I appreciate the design of public education," Young shares, "It really is the glue of the American dream: it's for everyone, regardless of background, socio-economic status, race, ethnicity, or disability. It forms the first building blocks toward the education that any student should have and the future citizens that a community wants. No matter what background a student comes from, no matter what academic level, each and every student is given the same opportunities to excel – whether in academics or other areas.



Statistics from the Kentucky Department of Education add further evidence of the equal opportunity that permeates the design of public education. During the 2018-2019 school year, 648,369 students were enrolled in the public school systems in Kentucky. Sixty percent of those students qualified to receive reduced price or even free meals, provided to them by their public schools. Across the state, 50,506 Advanced Placement (AP) exams were taken and of those, 8,341 were registered as low-income. Immigrant services were provided to 8,089 students. Every student deserves the right to an education that gives them every opportunity for success in life. Public schools provide this opportunity.

Though it has been extremely difficult to endure, the current pandemic has shown the flexibility and resiliency of the human spirit. Public schools and their communities have proven that through hard work, innovation, and cooperation, students are able to receive valuable instruction through distance learning. This was not an easy task for anyone involved. The amount of planning and organization done by administrators, the long hours devoted by teachers in order to best educate their students, the unending flexibility shown by other school staff, the dedication of families supporting their children, and the resiliency of the students themselves have all contributed to the success we have seen in virtual learning through public education.



It's important, though, to remember that the value of "school" doesn't exclusively lie in classes. Online class can be done exclusively – we've proven that. But, Young shared that Steve Burkich, retired former superintendent of Boyle County schools and a valued mentor, recently reminded him of the importance of public school. Burkich shared, 'We need to remember this. You can do "class" online, but you can't do "school" online... and there are many, many important things about "school" besides "class"'. Public education provides far more for students than just classroom learning. Each year, public schools do more and more for their communities. The majority of public schools fulfill basic needs of their students and their families. There are mental health and counseling services, career exploration experiences, at least two meals a day, AP and dual credit courses that can relieve financial stress when a student enters college, and so many more programs to support students' educational, mental, and emotional growth.

School is many things for different students. For some, school is a safe space. It's a place of warmth, food, and security. It stands in stark contrast to home, which may be a place in which learning simply cannot be the number one priority. While they are at school, they have the chance to be in a space to just be a student. There, they can learn and grow academically, while also developing social and interpersonal skills. Their classes, extracurriculars, athletics, and even free time with friends serve as spaces in which they can develop as individuals. For these students, public school is a place that meets most, if not all, of their needs beyond education.

During the quarantine, cafeteria and transportation staffs across the country delivered meals for months to students' front doors. Counselors were available far past the school day in order to take care of their students. For staff in schools and districts, like others across many walks of life, every day was spent figuring out how to do something that has never been done before. The problem-solving and creativity that administration, faculty, and staff have demonstrated have removed numerous barriers for children and families. It has been vital, it has been necessary, and it has made all the difference for so many families who would have struggled otherwise.

Online class has been around for a long time, and after the success of virtual learning on a larger scale shown by public schools, it will likely be a part of the education system far in the future. However, when we are able to return to normal, it is vital to remember the services that public education implements. David Young emphasizes the importance of supporting local school districts, “As an institution, schools do so many things for the community that would be lost if that public education setting wasn’t there”. The influence on identities and communities formed, the ability for equal opportunities and success, and quality of service provided by in person schooling all add to why public education is and will forever continue to be exceedingly valuable to our society.

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October 24, 2020