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ISSUE BRIEF SERIES

The Blueprint for Kentucky's Children is a unified policy agenda for child advocates across the Commonwealth. Our goal is to make Kentucky the best place to be young.

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Increasing the High School Graduation Rate

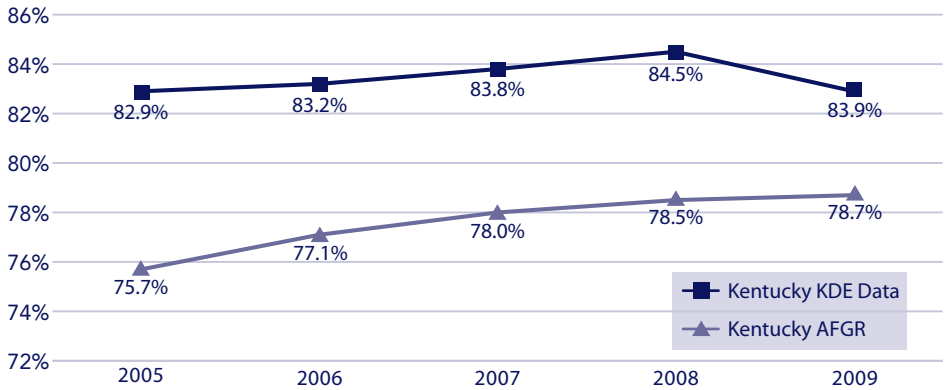
This issue brief series serves as a tool to share the latest statistics, research, best practices, and the group's recommendations for action. This brief focuses on prevention of high school dropout and strategies for improving the state's high school graduation rate.

We All Benefit when People Graduate from High School

All young people need a strong education to succeed in today's economy, and graduating from high school is more critical than ever before. Nearly six in ten jobs in the U.S. today are held by workers with at least some college education. Fifty years ago, the figure was only two in ten.[1] Despite these facts, nearly a third of all high school students fail to graduate on time, including an estimated 1.3 million students from the Class of 2010.[2] Young people in the U.S. today are less likely than their parents to have completed high school, a fact that distinguishes us from all other industrialized countries.[3]

Of high school students statewide in 2009, 83.9 percent graduated on time, meaning within four years or longer for students with an Individual Education Plan, according to the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE).[4] However, KDE is beginning to use a new and more accurate measure of the rate of students graduating on time - the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR).[5] Under this measure, only 78.7 percent of students graduated on time in 2009 (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: Kentucky High School Graduation Rates



Source: Graduation rates reported by the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) and Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) calculated using additional KDE data.

INCREASING THE HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION RATE

The National Cost of Students Dropping Out of School

Failing to graduate high school has long-term negative consequences for the individual and for society. Students who drop out of high school earn much less than those with diplomas, and are far more likely to rely on public assistance.[6,7] As a result of their lower incomes, students who drop out contribute much less in income taxes and sales taxes. A student who drops out is more likely to commit crimes and serve time in prison.[8] Additionally, they typically have worse health outcomes and often do not live as long as someone who completed high school.[9]

- On average, high school graduates earn $10,260 more per year than students who drop out of high school.[10]
- The estimated tax revenue and lifetime earnings loss from every male between the ages of 25 and 34 years of age who does not complete high school is approximately $944 billion.[11]
- Communities and states face an increased cost in public assistance and crime, estimated at $24 billion nationally for students who drop out over a ten-year period.[12]
- Seventy-five percent of America's state prison inmates dropped out of high school.[13]

Family and neighborhood poverty play an important role in determining high school dropout risk. Unequal economic opportunities among races have led to disparities in poverty rates across racial groups. This economic disparity is subsequently reflected in high school dropout rates, with youth of color dropping out at higher rates than White students.[14]

The Kentucky Cost of Students Dropping Out of School

Kentucky loses millions of dollars in wages and tax revenue each year due to students dropping out of school. Also, the state pays more in crime-related costs and public health costs to support students who dropped out than it does for those who graduate from high school. Kentucky's whole economy suffers because an educated workforce is one of the major factors used by companies in deciding where to locate.[15]

In Kentucky, 7 percent of youth ages 16 to 19 (approximately 16,000 youth) in 2008 were not in school and not high school graduates compared to 6 percent nationally.[16,17] Though the rate has improved since 2000, Kentucky ranks 25th among all states on this measure.[18] In the 2008-2009 school year, the Kentucky Department of Education reported 5,806 youth in grades 7 through 12 dropped out of school, yet this figure likely undercounts the number of youth who left school.[19]

- On average in 2009, a high school graduate in Kentucky earned $7,875 a year more than someone without a diploma.[20]
- Based on the 2009 income tax rates, a person who drops out of school pays $457 less in taxes per year than a high school graduate, resulting in a loss of millions of dollars in state income tax revenue.[21]
- Kentucky spends $2,065 more in state and federal funds on support programs for students who drop out than for high school graduates (see Table 1).
- Crime-related costs are likely as much as $3,000 higher for students who drop out than for high school graduates.[22]
- Students who dropped out from the class of 2009 alone are estimated to cost Kentucky almost $4.2 billion in lost wages over their lifetimes.[23]

Table 1: Government Transfers Received by Kentucky Adults (65 and under) by High School Completion, 2008

	People Who Dropped Out of High School	High School Graduates
Public Cash Assistance	$ 17	$ 15
Housing	$ 13	$ 9
Food Stamps	$ 783	$ 310
Unemployment Insurance	$ 292	$ 251
Disability Insurance	$ 76	$ 179
Medicare (Market Value)	$ 734	$ 396
Medicaid (Market Value)	$ 1,823	$ 513
TOTAL	**$ 3,738**	**$ 1,673**
Differential	$ 2,065	

Source: Current Population Survey, March Supplement 2009; Accessed March 2010

Long Term Cost Savings of Increasing High School Graduation

States and communities benefit financially when more students graduate from high school. An economic analysis of the impact of raising the compulsory age of school attendance in neighboring Ohio revealed a cost-benefit ratio of 1: 11.62 to the government - meaning that for every $1 Ohio spends on educating students who would have dropped out for additional years, the state benefits $11.62 over the course of a graduate's lifetime.[24]

The state budget is not the only beneficiary of higher graduation rates. The Ohio cost-benefit analysis shows that for every $1 spent on increasing graduation rates, the people of Ohio can expect a return of $31.45 in the form of increased tax revenue, increased earnings, and an improved economy. Most importantly, it didn't take long to begin seeing the net benefits of increased graduation rates: the Ohio study projects that it would take only 3.4 years to reach the point where the benefits exceed the initial investment.[25]

Kentucky would spend approximately $17,666 per pupil to educate its students for an additional two years if they continue their schooling to age 18 instead of dropping out at age 16.[26] If Kentucky realized the same benefits from increasing the graduation rate as Ohio has, Kentucky would experience the following:

- A net benefit to the state of $205,279 over the lifetime of each additional high school graduate.[27]
- Approximately $576,919 over the lifetime of each additional graduate in the form of increased earnings, economic growth, and cost avoidance.[28]

- Approximately $335 million over the lifetimes of the additional graduates for one year if the state decreased the number of students who dropped out by just 10 percent.[29]

Why Students Leave: Factors Influencing High School Dropout

Many factors influence students leaving school. Researchers are beginning to understand that high school dropout is not a single decision, but a process that often takes years to occur. Some of the key factors influencing dropout begin to play a role before a child is even born. Prenatal health plays a crucial role in developing cognitive capacity, and infants born below 5 pounds, 8 ounces, or low birthweight, are more likely to experience learning difficulties when they reach school age.[30] Likewise, social and task-related behavioral problems often manifest themselves in the 0-5 year age range, and attitudes toward learning are taught from an early age in the home. Early exposure to literacy and numeracy concepts allows children to enter Kindergarten ready to learn. Numerous studies show that high quality early childhood education programs, such as Head Start, allow for earlier identification of learning or behavioral problems, remedying those problems before the child starts to lag behind their peers.[31] In the long-term, early childhood education programs result in lower rates of grade retention (being "held-back"), higher levels of academic achievement, fewer special education services, and a stronger commitment to graduating from high school.[32]

Factors in elementary and middle school also impact students dropping out. The ability to read by the end of third grade plays a significant role in student success in school and is critical to high school graduation because students must be able to read to learn other subjects.[33] Research studies have identified early warning signs of dropout that can be recognized well before a student enters high school. Students who miss too many days of school, misbehave, or fail one or more courses will likely struggle with completing high school. Sixth graders identified as meeting the criteria for even one of these early warning indicators (see Table 2) only has a 10 to 20 percent chance of completing high school on time or within one year unless significant interventions are taken.[34]

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Table 2: Early Warning Indicators of Dropping Out of School

EARLY WARNING INDICATOR	MIDDLE SCHOOL	HIGH SCHOOL
Attendance	Less than 80 percent attendance is a strong predictor of dropping out and requires intensive intervention. Missing more than two days of school per month (less than 90 percent attendance) should prompt targeted intervention.	
Behavior	An unsatisfactory behavior grade or out-of-school suspension.	Out-of-school suspension in ninth grade.
Course Failure	Failing mathematics. Failing reading/language arts.	Any two semester course failures in ninth grade. (Particularly in core academic courses required for graduation). Any one semester failure should probably prompt intervention from classroom teacher.

Source: Adapted from Mac Iver, M., and Mac Iver, D. (2009). *Beyond the Indicators: An Integrated school-level approach to dropout prevention.* Mid-Atlantic Equity Center.

Increasing High School Graduation

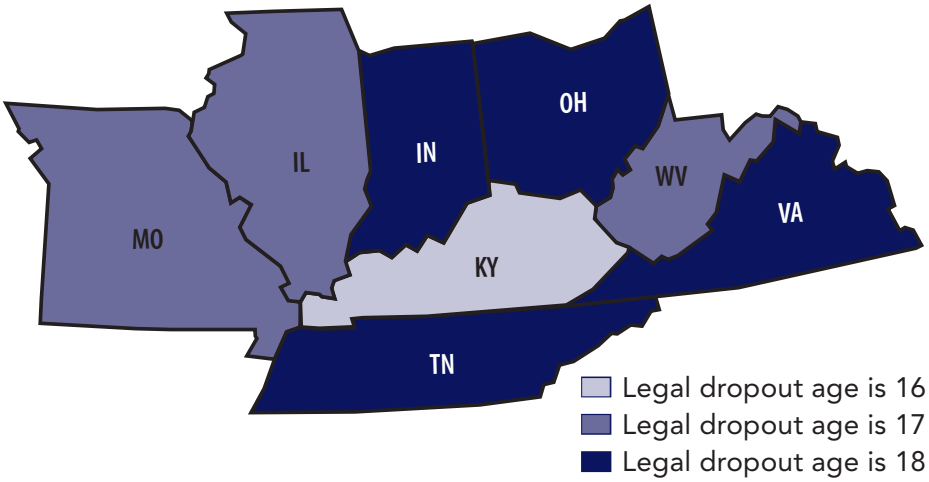
A wealth of research has been conducted to identify the best ways to help students succeed, graduate from high school and transition to college or employment. Best practices identified by numerous groups include these key elements:

- focus efforts on at-risk youth early;
- closely track key risk factors, including attendance, behavior and course grades;
- provide additional social and emotional supports to students; and
- create alternative learning environments for students with different learning needs.

Several proposals before the state legislature would likely improve high school graduation rates in Kentucky. These proposals include raising the compulsory age of school attendance, improving the quality of alternative programs, allowing early graduation, and connecting students to career and technical opportunities.

Raise the Compulsory Attendance Age: State legislatures around the country have begun raising the age at which a student may legally drop out of high school.[35] According to a 2007 report from the public policy firm Civic Enterprises, "Many current state efforts to keep young people in school are dealing with the compulsory school age, because there is a growing, shared understanding that raising the age requirement is also a way to raise expectations among students, their parents, school authorities, and the general public."[36] As of December 2010, 22 states and the District of Columbia have passed legislation requiring school attendance to age 18 with certain exceptions.[37] Ten other states have raised the attendance age to 17.[38, 39, 40]

Figure 2: Compulsory School Attendance Age in Kentucky and Surrounding States, December 2010



Source: U.S. Department of Labor, Employment Standards Administration and West Virginia Legislature.

Research shows that raising the compulsory attendance age can play an important role in raising graduation rates.[41] One study estimates that raising the compulsory education age can keep approximately one out of every four students in school who are likely to drop out.[42] Another study finds that keeping students in school even one year longer leads to a 12 percent increase in earnings.[43]

Raising the compulsory attendance age alone is not a perfect solution. Without increased efforts to keep students engaged in school, states may experience an increase in truancy charges.[44] As more states have adopted a higher dropout age, it has become clear that raising the compulsory attendance age should be only one part of a more comprehensive plan to increase graduation rates.[45]

Alternate Paths to Learning:

Meeting the needs of Kentucky students disenfranchised and disengaged from the traditional classroom setting is becoming increasingly important as Kentucky schools face a growing population of students for whom the status quo does not work. Alternative education programs have emerged as an educational option for those students who are not successful in the traditional classroom setting.

While states have long had alternative education legislation, the last decade was marked by legislative changes as states focused on strengthening alternative programs and improving graduation rates. Since 2000, 40 states and the District of Columbia have passed new legislation or have revisited legislation to strengthen alternative education.[46]

Although alternative education programs have grown rapidly, they lack quality standards both nationally and within the Commonwealth. In Kentucky, a clear definition of alternative programs does not exist, and few standards exist to ensure all alternative programs offer a high-quality learning environment. As Kentucky works to strengthen the quality of alternative education, school districts should implement programming that follows best practice standards, such as those identified by the National Alternative Education Association.[47]

States with Winning Programs

Several states have developed effective, comprehensive programs for increasing graduation rates, including Indiana, Georgia, New Hampshire, and Virginia. For purposes of comparison, this brief will present details of programs in the two neighboring states, Indiana and Virginia.

Indiana's Career Planning, School Flex, Double-Up, and Fast Track Programs

Indiana has garnered national attention for the improvements they have achieved in preventing dropout.[48, 49] Their multi-pronged approach incorporates raising the compulsory attendance age and enforcing it; allowing students flexibility in their educational plans; and providing an opportunity for those who have already dropped out to earn their diplomas. Other programs offer support and counseling to younger students in developing educational plans.[50]

Indiana's Dropout Prevention Programs

COMPULSORY ATTENDANCE TILL AGE 18

- Requires school attendance until age 18 with few exceptions. Students who drop out or are truant risk losing their work permits and driving privileges.

CAREER PLANNING

- Requires 8th graders to develop a flexible coursework and career plan. Includes periodic reviews and counseling for students falling behind.

SCHOOL FLEX

- Allows at-risk 11th and 12th grade students the flexibility to attend classes at least 3 hours per day while maintaining paid employment.

DOUBLE-UP

- Empowers colleges and universities to partner with high schools to offer early college, dual credit, and dual enrollment opportunities towards an associate's degree. Low-income students' costs are shared between the college and high school.

FAST TRACK

- Allows individuals who have dropped out to earn their high school diploma while enrolled in an associate's or certificate program at a state college or university. Students must pass the state graduation exam or approved equivalent, and the school district pays for high school coursework for students ages 17-18.

Source: National Governors Association (2006). Honoring Progress: An Update on the NGA Center Honor States, vol. 1. issue 2.

Virginia's Honor Schools and Project Graduation

Through the Governor's Honor Schools program, Virginia recognizes 30 schools with higher-than-average ninth grade retention rates and provides them with grants for supporting students' transitions to high school. Project Graduation is a statewide initiative helping at-risk students with tutorial and remedial services in reading, writing, and algebra. These initiatives complement Virginia's compulsory education age law to create a comprehensive system for preventing dropout and increasing graduation rates.

Conclusion

Thousands of students drop out of high school every year in our country, costing billions of dollars in lost tax revenues and productivity. In today's competitive global economy, which increasingly values knowledge and education, the United States cannot afford to squander the potential of even one youth. In order to grow and prosper as a nation, we must prepare our students for the challenges of the 21st century economy and build a highly skilled workforce.

Kentucky can increase high school graduation rates by raising expectations for students and ensuring students have access to programs that keep them engaged in school. Opportunities to improve graduation rates in Kentucky include the following:

- Increase the compulsory attendance age from 16 to 18;
- Ensure academic quality in every alternative program;
- Offer opportunities in all high schools for students to combine part-day schooling with employment; and
- Enable early college credits in all high schools through dual enrollment courses in either 4-year colleges or technical and community colleges.

Endnotes

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29 In the 2008-2009 school year 5,806 students dropped out of school. If that number were decreased by 10% that would create 581 new graduates. Over the course of one graduate's lifetime, Kentucky would benefit by $576,919; thus 581 new graduates would equal a benefit of $335 million over the course of those graduates' lifetimes.
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Table 3: High School Dropouts, Graduates, and Graduation Rates

	SY 2003			SY 2009		
	Number of dropouts, grades 7-12	Number of high school graduates	High school graduation rate	Number of dropouts, grades 7-12	Number of high school graduates	High school graduation rate
Kentucky	**6,219**	**36,379**	**79**	**5,806**	**41,064**	**84**
Adair Co.	38	141	66	23	184	86
Allen Co.	30	194	74	32	232	83
Anderson Co.	32	227	88	20	289	89
Ballard Co.	7	66	83	6	106	89
Barren Co.	42	235	80	44	246	77
Caverna Ind.	3	41	79	6	43	88
Glasgow Ind.	18	109	79	18	126	80
Bath Co.	28	89	67	4	153	88
Bell Co.	71	173	69	20	175	86
Middlesboro Ind.	35	83	67	16	113	81
Pineville Ind.	8	28	85	4	45	98
Boone Co.	53	899	91	76	1,072	89
Walton Verona Ind.	0	74	99	0	85	98
Bourbon Co.	23	168	90	29	189	86
Paris Ind.	7	48	91	3	40	89
Boyd Co.	23	229	86	20	220	92
Ashland Ind.	35	184	86	43	233	88
Fairview Ind.	2	43	88	0	76	97
Boyle Co.	19	178	82	20	199	88
Danville Ind.	18	98	85	12	122	88
Bracken Co.	7	77	92	3	65	87
Augusta Ind.	0	16	100	0	29	100
Breathitt Co.	40	110	50	6	137	80
Jackson Ind.	1	28	82	1	25	93
Breckinridge Co.	45	173	79	7	194	86
Cloverport Ind.	0	22	100	0	16	94
Bullitt Co.	101	627	81	127	756	84
Butler Co.	6	141	89	15	159	88
Caldwell Co.	18	146	85	13	139	91
Calloway Co.	13	189	90	19	214	90
Murray Ind.	4	118	99	5	121	93
Campbell Co.	48	303	85	38	314	80
Bellevue Ind.	5	47	85	0	52	100
Dayton Ind.	7	36	54	1	45	90
Fort Thomas Ind.	6	180	97	5	195	95
Newport Ind.	22	142	87	45	96	73
Silver Grove Ind.	0	15	94	3	14	74
Southgate Ind.	*	*	*	*	*	*
Carlisle Co.	12	58	88	6	51	96
Carroll Co.	21	89	70	5	114	90
Carter Co.	42	273	84	24	302	90
Casey Co.	26	134	82	14	135	82
Christian Co.	79	475	75	57	474	82
Clark Co.	119	280	69	36	338	85
Clay Co.	77	190	58	56	211	72
Clinton Co.	22	64	74	4	97	90
Crittenden Co.	10	98	90	13	78	77
Cumberland Co.	20	76	72	9	68	83
Daviess Co.	24	737	91	34	784	94
Owensboro Ind.	30	223	84	21	228	83
Edmonson Co.	19	138	84	13	121	85
Elliott Co.	19	76	78	4	68	78
Estill Co.	24	142	74	3	152	92
Fayette Co.	542	1,672	75	370	2,058	84
Fleming Co.	28	137	79	4	138	93
Floyd Co.	85	395	75	48	441	87
Franklin Co.	77	336	78	40	410	87
Frankfort Ind.	8	68	80	3	62	95
Fulton Co.	4	51	85	1	51	85
Fulton Ind.	2	37	86	0	23	96
Gallatin Co.	8	50	74	9	94	72
Garrard Co.	28	142	74	10	161	86
Grant Co.	55	212	79	21	236	81
Williamstown Ind.	6	41	77	4	42	86
Graves Co.	30	250	79	20	308	90
Mayfield Ind.	20	80	84	4	99	93
Grayson Co.	36	270	78	24	254	82
Green Co.	0	107	91	1	122	98
Greenup Co.	28	193	77	35	206	85
Raceland Ind.	1	70	99	4	73	92
Russell Ind.	10	158	95	8	152	97
Hancock Co.	0	83	98	6	122	98
Hardin Co.	183	876	80	81	993	88
Elizabethtown Ind.	21	167	85	10	161	85
West Point Ind.	*	*	*	*	*	*
Harlan Co.	105	327	75	26	262	78
Harlan Ind.	7	51	75	10	51	84
Harrison Co.	17	211	88	27	217	89
Hart Co.	23	140	84	8	151	88
Henderson Co.	122	424	74	59	460	87
Henry Co.	19	137	81	17	147	85
Eminence Ind.	1	18	86	6	34	100
Hickman Co.	4	45	82	3	55	87
Hopkins Co.	89	432	84	39	447	85
Dawson Springs Ind.	5	32	80	6	26	72
Jackson Co.	15	130	84	19	138	83
Jefferson Co.	898	4,610	69	1,775	5,323	71
Anchorage Ind.	*	*	*	*	*	*
Jessamine Co.	103	342	72	57	434	86
Johnson Co.	39	211	84	15	232	91
Paintsville Ind.	0	57	77	0	54	98
Kenton Co.	95	753	91	118	854	88
Beechwood Ind.	0	81	99	4	72	99
Covington Ind.	8	194	89	19	166	86
Erlanger-Elsmere Ind.	9	94	87	22	148	86

Table 3: High School Dropouts, Graduates, and Graduation Rates (continued)

	SY 2003			SY 2009		
	Number of dropouts, grades 7-12	Number of high school graduates	High school graduation rate	Number of dropouts, grades 7-12	Number of high school graduates	High school graduation rate
Ludlow Ind.	4	64	93	5	78	92
Knott Co.	31	153	72	30	142	86
Knox Co.	63	225	63	52	260	76
Barbourville Ind.	1	44	100	2	48	94
Larue Co.	40	152	80	0	189	96
Laurel Co.	102	440	72	74	535	84
East Bernstadt Ind.	*	*	*	*	*	*
Lawrence Co.	47	164	76	22	136	84
Lee Co.	15	70	78	4	76	86
Leslie Co.	42	147	79	7	105	82
Letcher Co.	39	201	77	13	198	88
Jenkins Ind.	3	38	97	0	45	100
Lewis Co.	17	143	81	3	164	96
Lincoln Co.	58	240	71	24	255	86
Livingston Co.	16	87	89	6	121	93
Logan Co.	30	195	78	15	236	92
Russellville Ind.	7	85	89	3	62	83
Lyon Co.	1	64	86	2	85	92
McCracken Co.	39	415	91	51	414	90
Paducah Ind.	49	159	70	23	188	87
McCreary Co.	20	175	76	14	187	85
McLean Co.	13	114	85	8	104	94
Madison Co.	29	449	88	77	625	88
Berea Ind.	10	61	86	6	67	88
Magoffin Co.	24	144	72	6	163	93
Marion Co.	21	172	84	21	198	90
Marshall Co.	24	276	83	41	317	86
Martin Co.	29	151	79	13	148	86
Mason Co.	47	165	86	20	182	84
Meade Co.	35	323	81	18	341	90
Menifee Co.	19	98	74	6	66	80
Mercer Co.	9	152	94	3	218	94
Burgin Ind.	2	21	84	1	31	91
Harrodsburg Ind.	8	50	86	**	**	**
Metcalfe Co.	3	55	73	22	98	82
Monroe Co.	13	118	84	17	147	91
Montgomery Co.	15	203	79	26	249	81
Morgan Co.	31	150	78	29	144	87
Muhlenberg Co.	37	348	83	30	315	84
Nelson Co.	40	304	87	23	381	94
Bardstown Ind.	11	103	74	16	113	86
Nicholas Co.	13	69	85	3	83	82
Ohio Co.	21	244	89	37	259	87
Oldham Co.	33	612	93	35	776	95
Owen Co.	32	92	74	9	132	89
Owsley Co.	10	53	79	5	46	88
Pendleton Co.	15	185	91	13	183	91
Perry Co.	44	200	68	29	253	90
Hazard Ind.	0	77	88	0	81	100
Pike Co.	86	583	84	73	613	82
Pikeville Ind.	6	79	83	4	74	93
Powell Co.	39	125	68	21	148	87
Pulaski Co.	41	503	79	39	550	86
Science Hill Ind.	*	*	*	*	*	*
Somerset Ind.	12	91	85	11	109	85
Robertson Co.	5	14	82	7	32	86
Rockcastle Co.	26	185	77	20	211	92
Rowan Co.	34	171	80	22	217	88
Russell Co.	50	135	70	6	190	95
Scott Co.	70	332	77	61	376	83
Shelby Co.	52	305	78	34	351	88
Simpson Co.	27	167	87	17	186	84
Spencer Co.	9	131	89	11	170	91
Taylor Co.	15	204	90	6	204	94
Campbellsville Ind.	17	76	76	13	77	81
Todd Co.	23	127	85	8	136	90
Trigg Co.	20	109	78	14	172	90
Trimble Co.	12	92	87	10	83	84
Union Co.	36	147	81	13	157	89
Warren Co.	86	693	87	73	821	89
Bowling Green Ind.	23	208	87	19	233	94
Washington Co.	17	140	84	12	139	89
Wayne Co.	36	145	74	20	170	93
Monticello Ind.	9	48	81	11	53	84
Webster Co.	10	139	84	5	163	92
Providence Ind.	2	24	89	**	**	**
Whitley Co.	55	209	79	18	259	88
Corbin Ind.	4	158	91	1	168	100
Williamsburg Ind.	3	46	84	2	67	99
Wolfe Co.	7	84	76	4	69	92
Woodford Co.	17	245	86	17	295	92

Source: Kentucky Department of Education website.

* District has no schools with grades 7-12.

** District merged with county school district.

Data Notes: School district figures may include youth who graduated/dropped out while in a district-operated high/middle school, vocational-technical school, special education school, alternative school and instructional program in a nondistrict-operated institution. Statewide graduation figure includes youth who graduated but were not counted within a district due to being enrolled less than 30 days before graduation.

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