

Better Together: How inclusive design as a policy process impacts stakeholder understanding, ownership, and engagement in assessment and accountability innovation – Allen County, Kentucky Case Study

APPENDIX C: Background and Significance

Kentucky United We Learn Initiative

Since 1990, Kentucky has led the nation in advancing comprehensive state reforms in educational assessment and accountability (Gong and Reidy, 1996), and yet racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps persist in every district (Butler and Poquette, 2019). A staggering 16% of Kentucky youth remain “disconnected” with no high school degree or job—among the worst rates in the nation (Center for American Progress, 2020). Clearly, Kentucky’s considerable state assessment and accountability infrastructure is not ensuring equitable outcomes as hoped.

Emerging from the COVID-19 pandemic, the Kentucky Board of Education (KBE) and the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) wanted to better understand what was and wasn’t working in education for Kentucky students and families. They wanted local needs and perspectives to drive the design of a new assessment and accountability system, rather than following the same “bad leadership habits” wherein “the same insiders call the shots behind closed doors, year after year” (Glass and Flanagan, 2023). In 2021, with the hire of Commissioner Jason Glass, the state launched an effort to redesign state systems hand-in-hand with diverse stakeholders, especially those whose voices are historically least heard in educational decision-making.

That summer, Glass launched the Kentucky Coalition for Advancing Education (KCAE) to co-create a new vision for Kentucky education. With support from the Center for Innovation in Education (CIE), he recruited an intentionally diverse group of more than 60 education leaders and stakeholders to join the coalition through a mix of appointments, and open application, and cold-calls targeting demographics that are historically under-represented in state decision-making. KDE and CIE facilitated the KCAE to create the new vision using CIE’s process of Inclusive Design. The process embedded four habits—inclusion, empathy, co-creation, and reciprocity—to ensure the work remained tied to the needs and interests of impacted stakeholders (Figure 1):

- **Inclusion:** Intentionally inviting, including and valuing the perspectives of diverse stakeholders, especially those which are often devalued or left out of decisions that affect their communities.
- **Empathy:** Truly listening and understanding the concerns of others and trying to understand how they feel—not just how they think or what their opinions are—about issues that affect them.
- **Co-Creation:** Diverse stakeholders bring together multiple perspectives and understandings to—on an equal plane—collaboratively design, test, and refine solutions to a shared problem.
- **Reciprocity:** The ongoing “give and take” between leaders and other stakeholders that acknowledgement of mutual dependence and acknowledge that ongoing responsiveness and two-way communication is necessary to build trust.

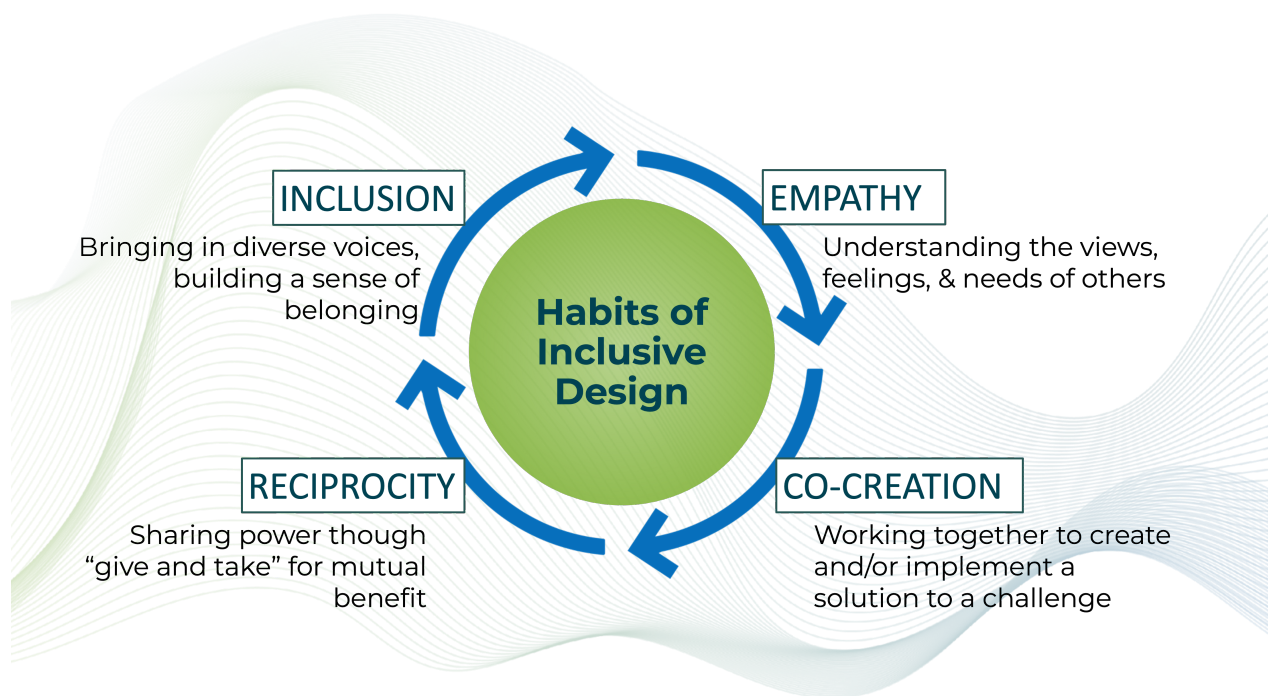


Figure 1. The Habits of Inclusive Design. (Center for Innovation in Education, n.p.)

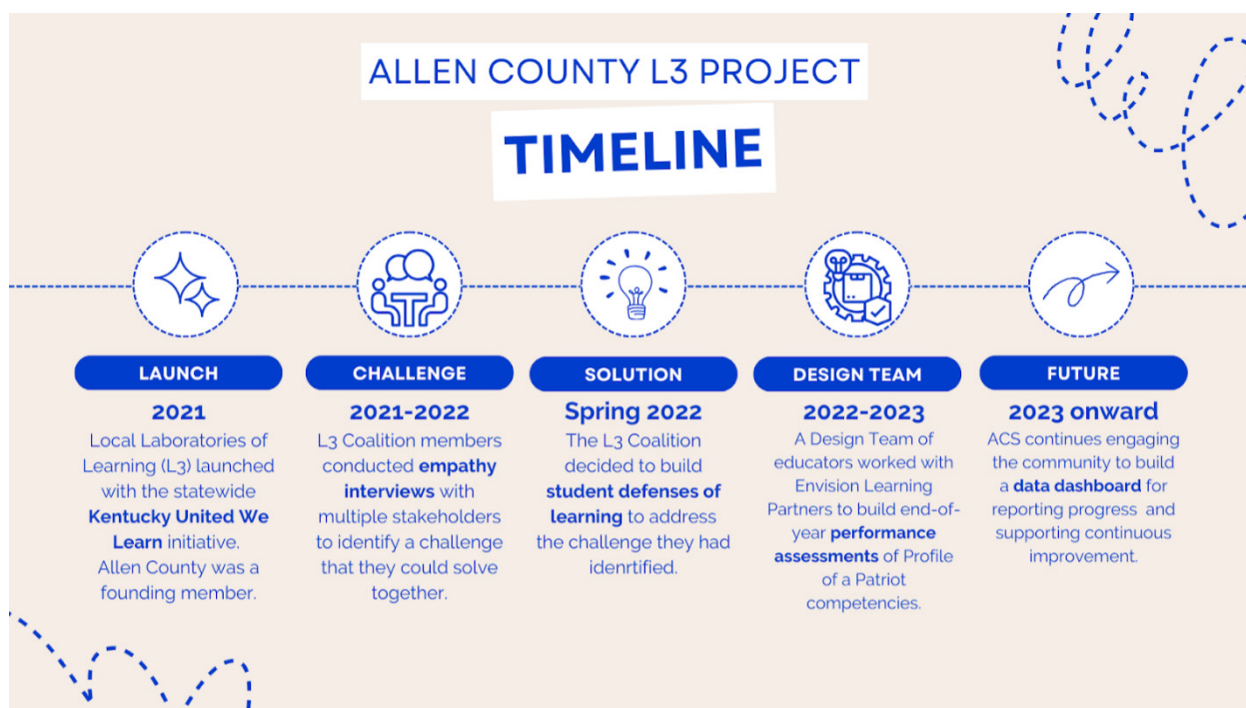
Over six meetings and eight weeks, the KCAE conducted “empathy interviews” (CIE, 2025) with a broad range of stakeholders about what they wanted from Kentucky’s schools, and they collaboratively analyzed the interview data to distill key themes. From there, the KCAE worked across lines of difference to develop a common understanding of the problems faced by impacted students, families, and communities; and created a single, actionable vision to embrace a better future. At the Kentucky Education Summit later that fall, the KCAE unanimously released its culminating report, *United We Learn: Hearing Kentucky’s Voices on the Future of Education Report* (Kentucky Department of Education, 2021a).

That same fall, KDE invited districts to become Local Laboratories of Learning (L3s) to put *United We Learn* into practice. L3 districts agreed to engage their local communities in CIEs process of inclusive design to collaboratively develop more locally relevant assessment and accountability models.

Then in 2022, with support from CIE and other national partners, KDE won a \$3 million federal grant from the Competitive Grants for State Assessments program to translate what had begun under the KCAE into a new state system of assessment and accountability. The award supported the creation of a new, inclusive coalition called the Kentucky *United We Learn Council* (the “Council”), facilitated by the Department of Education, the University of Kentucky Center for Next Generation Leadership, and other national partners. Following the same multi-pronged recruitment process as the KCAE, the Council consisted of more than 60 members including students, family and community members, educators, school and district leaders, business and community organizations, advocacy groups, and higher education. The Council was organized into three technical committees tasked with learning from the L3 innovations to design a new, technically sound and locally relevant model for state assessment and accountability, and to create a legislative roadmap for making it real. To the extent that the new system designs require federal flexibility, the roadmap may ultimately include an application to the federal Innovative Assessment Demonstration Authority authorized under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (Poon, et al., 2025).

At the time of this report, the Council has developed a fourth prototype for a new balanced accountability model that includes a mix of local and state accountability indicators. The goal of this work has been sharpened into a “moonshot,” endorsed by KBE, that “To build a prosperous Kentucky, we will launch an accountability system that is meaningful and useful to all our learners” (Kentucky Department of Education, 2025).

Allen County Schools’ L3 Initiative



Allen County Schools joined the KUWL initiative in the first cohort of L3 districts. At the time, ACS had already led a community-engaged process to understand how the school system needed to change so that it could more fully develop the skills and dispositions students need to pursue their interests and address community needs. With input from diverse stakeholders, they had created a Profile of a Patriot, defining the knowledge and skills (“competencies”) that all ACS graduates should attain; a Learner-Centered Instructional Model, articulating the kinds of classroom- and school-based experiences needed to help students develop the competencies listed in the Profile of a Patriot, and success criteria, defining what mastery of each competency looks like (Allen County Schools, n.p.). Joining the inaugural L3 cohort presented as an opportunity to influence broader systems change while supporting local work through technical assistance and shared learning with a community of peers.

Upon joining the KUWL and L3 initiative, Superintendent Hamby formed a local L3 Coalition of roughly 30 members, including teachers, families, community members, business leaders, and students. L3 coalition members conducted “empathy interviews” (CIE, 2025) with over 70 stakeholders in the community, targeting underrepresented groups, students, higher education faculty, and local government officials. They sought to understand how different individuals experienced testing and accountability in the district and what are their common pain points.

Drawing themes from the empathy data, the Coalition articulated a single problem statement that articulated both the district's goals and the questions that still needed solving:

"The Allen County Community wants an educational system that prepares students to address and improve the economic, social, and workforce challenges of our community. However, the current system only assesses mastery of a narrow set of academic standards and doesn't address districts' obligation to develop students' skills, passion, and interests.

How might we...

- *Empower our students with the skills and dispositions they need to pursue their passion and interests and address community needs?*
- *Assess students' growth of the skills and dispositions needed to pursue their passions and interests and measure their growth over time?*
- *Communicate this to our community, and increase community understanding of this?"*

In early 2022, the L3 Coalition brainstormed several ideas to solve this question and decided on one: student defenses of learning. This means students would demonstrate what they've learned through projects and real-world learning experiences all year. Then, at the end of the year, each school would host an Exhibition of Learning where students show off their portfolios of work to a public audience. The Coalition made a storyboard with small steps to make this happen and asked other people for feedback.

During the 2022-2023 school year, ACS hired Envision Learning Partners to help a small Design Team of 5-6 ACS teachers build end-of-year performance assessments that students would take to show how well they have learned the skills in the Profile of a Patriot. The Design Team chose which skills to test for each grade span, from kindergarten to high school (see Table 1: Performance Outcomes). Then, they created performance assessments to measure those skills.

	Primary	Intermediate	Middle	High
Culminating Assessment Prototype	Exhibitions	Exhibitions	Exhibitions/Presentations of Learning	Portfolio Defense
Competency	1. Effective Communicator 2. Accountable Collaborator	1. Effective Communicator 2. Accountable Collaborator	1. Effective Communicator 2. Creative Problem Solver	1. Effective Communicator 2. Resilient Learner 3. Problem Solver

Table 1: Performance Outcomes. For each grade span, the Design Team chose which Profile of a Patriot competencies to test in a culminating assessment. For a complete description of the performance outcomes please see <https://tinyurl.com/4fcrc6jk>.

From there, each ACS school began transforming the student learning experience to include more project-based learning, to connect their interests with community-based internships, and to present their learning to peers and adults through public presentations of learning and/or defenses of learning at gateway years. Students in the upper grades now curate artifacts of their work in a portfolio platform.

By the 2024-2025 school year when our study took place, every teacher had received training in “gold standard” project-based learning; every classroom was expected to do at least one project per year; and every school hosted at least one exhibition of learning in which students showcased their learning and Profile of a Patriot competencies in a public format open to the community. In grades K-6, every student prepared an exhibition, whereas exhibitions were elective in the middle and high schools. The high school was also in its second year of implementing portfolios and requiring all seniors to complete a portfolio defense to a panel of educators and members of the broader community.

At the time of the writing of [this report](#), the district has also engaged its community to articulate a common set of data related to the demonstrations of learning, and has contracted a data visualization partner to create a dashboard of publicly-facing metrics that matter. More importantly, the district is committed to engaging the community in reciprocal conversations about the data, including what matters most, what is actionable, as well as joint identification of shared next steps in the work.

Significance

Allen County is not alone in identifying the limitations of current state assessment and accountability models, which, on balance, reflect a narrow set of academic indicators in ways that have stifled districts’ ability to attend to student and community flourishing more broadly defined. Federal and state policymakers are paying attention to a growing number of districts and states that are developing articulations of broader competencies (such as a Profile of a Graduate or Portrait of a Learner) and creating innovative assessments and accountability dashboards to better reflect local needs and interests (National Association of State Boards of Education, 2022).

But two things distinguish the work of Allen County—and Kentucky’s statewide KUWL initiative—from these other efforts. One is the belief that how assessment and accountability innovation occurs is just as important as the technical aspects of the new system designs. The other is the belief that policy achievements like a Profile or a dashboard are insufficient goals, and that real accountability occurs in community-engaged, reciprocal conversations that are fostered around the measures.

To the first point, it is well documented by Coburn (2003), Morel et al. (2019), and others that reforms that are not co-created with local expertise risk being dismissed locally as “another fad that will soon pass,” resulting in minimum local compliance with the reform rather than the local reform ownership that is a necessary component of transformation at scale. In addition, scholarship examining the intersection of policy and equity shows how often a privileged group of powerful actors can “influence education without democratic input or accountability,” threatening equity and forcing local actors to push back as “agitators” (Hernandez 2020). Thus reforms that are not designed hand-in-hand with groups that are currently and historically underserved or oppressed by the system run the risk of continuing the cycle of causing harm to those groups.

Instead, ACS and the KUWL initiative's work is guided by the theory of action that by applying habits of inclusive design with broad stakeholders, especially those help farthest from decision-making tables, while designing state and local systems of assessment and accountability, education leaders can 1) create technically sound systems that both satisfy state priorities and address local, equity-driven interests; and 2) increase public trust in education and local ownership of reform—prerequisites for sustainable transformation at scale (Coburn, 2003; Oakes & Welner, 2023).

Further, Allen County is keenly interested in how it can best engage its diverse stakeholders in an improvement process, through reciprocal conversations that surround the assessment and accountability measures. The district is reframing “accountability” in ways that can help change the national narrative from a top-down compliance exercise to a community-engaged process that builds trust, rather than something that happens because of distrust.

Therefore, this project advances inquiry on the leading edge of the national policy conversation, poised to inform the development of federal, state, and local policies and practices that shift the locus of reform ownership from externally imposed to locally co-created, so that assessment and accountability solutions better meet both state local needs and are more likely to be sustained.

In addition to the cutting-edge policy premises being tested in ACS, a case study of the district holds particular relevance to the national policy conversation because of the district's demographics—it is representative of white poverty in Kentucky and much of rural America—and because, as one of the first L3 districts, its work is far along enough to study both process and early evidence of impact. Further, Superintendent Hamby carries strong support from the school board for the district's assessment and accountability innovations, and – as someone “all in” on the KUWL initiative's TOA—he stands ready to both learn and share insights with the broader Kentucky initiative and national conversation.



Better Together:

How inclusive design as a policy process impacts stakeholder understanding, ownership, and engagement in assessment and accountability innovation – Allen County, Kentucky Case Study