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Stories & Research on Innovation in Education

We've Been Here Before: KERA, Vibrant Learning, and Kentucky's Unfinished Promise

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A Familiar Moment in Kentucky Education

As districts across Kentucky create Portraits of a Learner and lean into what is now called **vibrant learning**, we find ourselves reflecting on an earlier chapter in our state's history. In many ways, we have been here before.

Both of us entered education at pivotal moments. James began teaching in 1990—the very year the Kentucky Education Reform Act (KERA) was born. Carmen began four years later, just as the system was beginning to breathe. The feeling was the same: this was a season of radical hope.

At that time, legislators stood behind their work with pride, backed by a courageous $1.3 billion investment. Classrooms were alive with portfolios and performance tasks. Writing portfolios became the heartbeat of instruction; students didn't just complete assignments—they curated their learning. Content knowledge alone was no longer enough; application was the priority. Looking back, the word that best captures that era is—ironically—**vibrant.**

THE "LOST" GOALS OF KERA

While modern focus often lands on test scores, the original 1990 legislation (KRS 158.6451) defined success through human capacities that mirror today's Portraits:

- **Goal 3: Developing "self-sufficient individuals of good character."**
- **Goal 4: Developing "responsible members of a family, work group, or community."**
- **Goal 6: The ability to "connect and integrate" knowledge across all subject fields.**

When Trust Gave Way to Compliance

By the mid-1990s, the atmosphere shifted. What started as collaboration slowly gave way to a high-stakes competition. The **KIRIS model** introduced a cycle of financial rewards and sanctions that began to pit districts against one another. We remember the "bonus checks" issued to teachers in high-performing schools—a "carrot and stick" approach that fundamentally changed the motivation behind reform.

As the stakes rose, the gaze of the state turned toward score validity. Because teachers were the ones scoring the portfolios, a heavy undertone of distrust emerged. This suspicion was institutionalized through formal state audits beginning in the 1992-1993 school year. The tipping point arrived with the **1995 Hambleton Report,** which questioned the reliability of portfolio scoring (Hambleton, 1995). Almost overnight, professional expertise was reframed as "potential bias." Even as early as 1997, in-state educational leaders were questioning the shift toward high-stakes accountability.

> **"Over the course of KIRIS testing, the growing pressure for increased reliability and tighter alignment with a specified body of content has translated into a shift away from "open-endedness" and performance in the assessments. The logic is clear. The more open and performance-based an assessment is, the more variety in the responses, the more judgment is needed in scoring; the more judgment in scoring, the lower the reliability. Hence, less open-endedness and less focus on performance." (Jones & Whitford, 1997, 278).**

Soon after, federal policy accelerated this narrowing. **No Child Left Behind** arrived in 2001, mandating standardized, bubble-sheet testing as the only currency of success. Gradually, Kentucky moved away from the mechanisms designed to support deeper learning. What remained was a system of accountability without authenticity.

The Evolution of an Epiphany

By the late 2000s, the "sorting machine" was in high gear. We were both serving as superintendents, watching our districts race toward a state-mandated "score of 100."

The North Star: Carmen in Danville (2009)
In 2009, Carmen reached an epiphany: Hope alone wasn't enough. She realized the system was failing to prepare students for anything beyond a test. Her community stepped up to name the skills they believed every graduate deserved, creating the **Danville Diploma**—a local North Star designed to rise above the turbulence of the state's sorting machine and return to authentic learning. **(Carmen in Danville, 2009)**

The Breaking Point: James in Shelby County (2012)
Three years later, in 2012, James experienced the heartbreaking reality of why Carmen's work was so necessary. During a routine classroom visit in Shelby County, a third-grade greeter shook his hand warmly—and then apologized: **"I'm a novice."** A nine-year-old child had internalized a performance label as her identity. That moment exposed the full weight of the drift: while we were trying to innovate in pockets, the system at large had finally succeeded in replacing the "child" with the "data point."

Two Designs for Schooling

- **The Subject-Centered Model: Born of the industrial age to sort students through "one-size-fits-all" experiences. (Charles Eliot, 1892).**
- **The Student-Centered Model: A strengths-based model designed to empower students by leaning into curiosity and purpose. (John Dewey, 1902).**

The Moral Crossroads

These two moments brought us to a shared moral crossroads. We realized we were faced with an ethical choice: Would we turn a blind eye to children who clearly had the ability to become productive citizens but

showed no motivation to participate in one-size-fits-all, subject-centered schools? Or were we willing to do the hard work of creating student-centered systems with student-centered assessment models? For us, the choice was clear. We had a moral and ethical duty to move beyond the "sorting machine." It was no longer enough to manage a system that worked for some; we had to build one where student curiosity was the engine, not a casualty.



PBS News Hour (2013). *Kentucky School District Wants Project Based Learning to Outshine Testing [Video].* https://www.pbs.org/newshour/show/school-district-uses-project-based-learning-over-testing

Innovation Thrives—and the Tension Mounts

Word began to spread about Danville and the very different kind of student experience resulting from our new North Star - the Danville Diploma.[1] Visitors arrived from NPR, Harvard, and PBS because people were hungry for meaningful learning. Achievement followed; Danville's state ranking rose to 24th by 2011. High school students designed catapults and constructed furniture for their classroom. Middle school students were immersed in authentic, performance-based assessment tasks and fourth graders built chicken coops and business plans for selling eggs at the local farmers' market.

Students defended their growth through Gateway presentations in grades 5, 8, and 12. They communicated, collaborated, persevered, and solved real problems.

[1] The Danville Diploma is still operational in Danville Public Schools and available at: https://dhs.danvilleschools.net/students/senior-gateway-interviews/danville-diploma

In many ways, this work rediscovered what KERA had always intended: Learning was authentic, meaningful and relevant. It mattered to students.

In Shelby County, we pursued a parallel shift driven by two primary levers: the implementation of a **Profile of a Learner** and the design of learning experiences that culminated in public exhibitions of learning.[2] We invited parents, the community, and student peers to witness these exhibitions, making the learning visible and accountable to the people who mattered most.

The Profile of a Learner became the hub for all curriculum design. Our instructional coaches worked alongside teachers to design standards-based units equipped with student-facing performance scales. These scales allowed students to self-assess their own progress while providing a clear framework for teachers to offer meaningful feedback. Our entire strategic plan was centered around these student-centered outcomes.

Then, Kentucky introduced yet another accountability system. Overnight, rankings shifted dramatically. Despite years of innovation, the state numbers told a different story. Once again, Kentucky had reset the scoreboard.

The work didn't stop, but it entered a season of profound tension. As leaders, **we were serving two masters:** the moral duty to continue student-centered work, and the institutional pressure to ensure scores remained "acceptable" in the public eye. We were caught in a constant, wearying act of balance—trying to satisfy the state's hunger for data while protecting the "vibrant" experiences our students actually needed. Kentucky's journey since KERA reveals this familiar, exhausting cycle: ambitious vision, misaligned assessment, and the eventual "reset" that forces educators into a state of divided loyalty.

Beyond Blame: Acknowledging the Risk

We don't tell this story to find fault or lay blame on any of the legislators or Department of Education leaders who implemented the changes that hampered our work. In fact, the opposite is true. We remember many who encouraged us along the way and sought to support our vision even within the confines of rigid policy.

We are just acknowledging that the duality caused by the intense pressure for test scores made our student-centered designs feel incredibly risky. It is difficult to innovate when the ground beneath you is constantly shifting. Our goal is not to look back in anger, but to look forward with clarity. We must acknowledge that the "duality" of the past was a systemic barrier, not a personal one, and our task now is to build a framework where doing the right thing for a child no longer feels like a professional gamble.

[2] The Shelby County Portrait of a Graduate has evolved over time to be the current version of the Shelby County Public Schools Community Dashboard. Additional detail on that dashboard can be found here: https://sites.google.com/shelby.kyschools.us/scpsdashboard/home



Photocredit: Shelby East Middle School Defenses 2025

Vibrant Learning as a Return, Not a Departure

Today's **Local Laboratories of Learning (L3)**[3] and Portraits of a Learner signal a renewed commitment to ending that divide. Districts like **Bullitt County** demonstrate what's possible when a community refuses to serve two masters and instead defines success locally. This moment offers Kentucky a powerful opportunity—not to invent something new, but to reclaim something unfinished.

If vibrant learning is to endure, it must be more than a branding exercise. It must be lived in classrooms, reflected in assessment, and protected in policy. KERA taught us that deeper learning requires coherence—alignment between what we value, how we teach, and how we measure success. Without that alignment, even the most inspiring visions struggle to survive.

[3] The L3 project is a collaborative network of school districts and community partners proactively designing innovative systems for student assessment and accountability (Kentucky Department of Education, 2026). https://www.education.ky.gov/school/innov/Pages/Local-Laboratories-of-Learning-(L3s).aspx

A Letter to the Commonwealth

The history of Kentucky education reform teaches us that a system designed to sort will eventually fail the children it is meant to serve. Today, we are once again asking: Can we trust local communities to define what success looks like?

- ***To our Policy Leaders:***
  - Our efforts in 1990 showed the nation that Kentucky can innovate and lead. Performance-based learning cannot survive if it is measured by the yardstick of a single-day, high-stakes test. Instead, we must endorse a system that recognizes students as unique individuals, refusing to let a single test score define their success or readiness. We need a student-centered system that gives kids the freedom to create their own unique and compelling body of evidence. For some, that evidence may rely heavily on test scores; for others, it may be performance-based. The point is to build a system brave enough to allow every individual to prove their readiness through the evidence that best reflects their strengths.
- ***To our Educators:***
  - Do not let the "distrust trap" of the past discourage you. Your professional judgment is the most valuable asset in the system.
- ***To our Parents:***
  - You know your child is more than a label. Demand an education that sees their "Novice" score as a starting point, not an identity.
- ***To our Employers:***
  - You need graduates who can collaborate and solve problems. Join our defense panels and see the evidence of student competency for yourselves.
- ***To our Students:***
  - You are the center of this work. Your growth matters more than your rank. Do not apologize for where you are on the journey.

We have a second chance to finish what was started thirty years ago, so that no nine-year-old child in Kentucky ever feels the need to apologize for being a "novice" again.



Shelby County teachers and students sharing to the Next Generation Leadership Academy in 2020.

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