

EDUCATOR RETENTION AND WELLNESS IN KENTUCKY

AN OVERVIEW

prepared by the

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and the KSVT RESEARCH TEAM

for the

KENTUCKY STUDENT VOICE TEAM

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1. Background

On November 15, 2025, the Kentucky Student Voice Team will continue its series of public hearings on the future of education in Kentucky by holding a hearing on issues facing Kentucky's teachers. The purpose of KSVT's *Rose Revival Hearings* is to brainstorm potential solutions that the state of Kentucky could take to resolve the crises in Kentucky's common schools. **This fact sheet outlines some of the most pressing problems teachers deal with every day.**

2. Overview

In 1989, the Kentucky Supreme Court decided *Rose v. Council for Better Education*, which renewed the Kentucky Constitution's promise for efficient common schools. **That decision recognized the importance of teachers in common schools**, noting that Kentucky's teachers were neither paid well, properly trained, nor provided with enough instructional support.

Just one year after *Rose*, the General Assembly passed the Kentucky Education Reform Act ("KERA"). **KERA increased funding for teachers' professional development by more than 2000% and set standards for teacher training and certification.** Through 2007, the General Assembly frequently raised salaries to keep up with inflation.

But Kentucky's investment in teachers has waned in recent years. Teachers today are paid less, given less support, and receive less training. **These issues have contributed to a teacher shortage and retention crisis.** 80% of school districts have unfilled positions, and 1 in 4 teachers every year choose not to return the next year. Every unfilled vacancy and every teacher who quits puts more burden on those who remain, increasing burnout, exacerbating the crisis, and disrupting students' learning experiences.

Students across Kentucky feel the effects of these crises facing teachers. They walk into classrooms to find their teacher has quit. They are taught by teachers who have not been trained to teach the subject they are assigned to teach, and by other teachers who have completed only cursory training. Still other teachers are overworked, underappreciated, and unable to keep up with the rapidly changing learning environment of today's classrooms.

When students face these problems, their constitutional rights are violated. Common schools in Kentucky cannot teach students the skills they need to thrive when teachers themselves are struggling to make ends meet and have been all but abandoned by the state.

3. Kentucky's Teacher Shortage

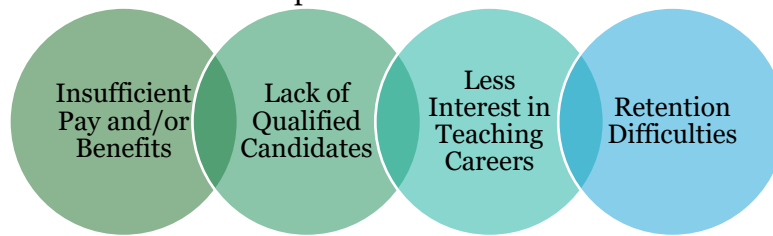
Teacher shortages are not a new problem in Kentucky. However, since 2019, there has been a marked increase in the *magnitude* of shortages experienced across the state. This section explores the key dimensions of Kentucky's teacher shortage.

3.1. The Current State of Kentucky's Teacher Shortage

For the 2025-2026 academic year, **80%** of Kentucky school districts—amounting to **140 districts**—reported having at least one unfilled position in their district. Of these, 671 were “certified vacancies,” which includes teaching positions. Additionally, the state has found that **teacher shortages have reached the majority of subject areas.**

3.2. Causes of Kentucky's Teacher Shortage

Broadly speaking, the causes of Kentucky's teacher shortage can be grouped into four related categories. Later sections of this brief explore several of these causes in more detail.



First, superintendents, principals, *and* teachers routinely characterize insufficient pay and/or benefits (e.g., health insurance plans that are incredibly limited in coverage) as the **biggest obstacle to hiring and retaining teachers**. For example, [superintendents reported](#) that pay and a change in teacher retirement benefit policies were the “largest issue[s] affecting certified staff recruitment.”

Second, nearly all superintendents and most principals in Kentucky regard **a lack of qualified candidates** as a significant barrier to recruiting teachers. Between 2019 and 2023, the relative percentage of “**unavailable**” or “**unacceptable**” [applicants reported by superintendents and principals](#) **increased across every subject area**.

Third, since 2019, there has been a **general downward trend in the size of the teacher pipeline**. Between 2019 and 2023, the number of individuals completing Kentucky's teacher preparation programs [decreased in every subject area](#).

Fourth, with an average teacher turnover rate of **22.5%**, Kentucky **ranks second-to-last** among its peer states when it comes to retaining teachers. Teachers have cited **mental health concerns, including burnout, and state-imposed restrictions on classroom practices** as major factors influencing their decision to leave.

State	Annual Teacher Turnover Rate*
Illinois	9.8%
Indiana	13.1%
Virginia	14.0%
Ohio	14.1%
Missouri	14.5%
West Virginia	15.0%
Kentucky	22.5%
Tennessee	23.3%

*Based on Most Recent Data Available as of July 2025 for Kentucky and as of July 2024 for Other States.

3.3. Strategies Used to Mitigate Kentucky's Teacher Shortage

Many schools and districts are using a **patchwork approach** to respond to the teacher shortage. For the 2025-2026 academic year, the most common strategy used by districts to fill vacancies, apart from continuing to seek qualified applicants, has been utilizing **substitute teachers**. In 2023, half of the state's districts reported regularly using **long-term substitute teachers** to cover unfilled positions. Other common strategies include: (1) using retired teachers; (2) delegating hiring for unfilled positions to private staffing companies; (3) increasing class sizes; (4) combining classes; (5) reducing or eliminating teachers' planning periods; and (6) making use of emergency certification pathways.

Recently, some more **proactive** strategies have been implemented. **HB 377**, enacted in 2024, now allows Kentucky student teachers to receive a stipend of up to \$5,000. Previously, student teachers could not receive any form of compensation. Additionally, several districts, including Jefferson County and Nelson County, have started exploring partnerships with **local universities and/or education cooperatives** that enable participants to become fully certified teachers in a reduced timeframe.

3.4. Impact of Teacher Shortages on Kentucky Teachers and Students

Kentucky's teacher shortage continues to impact both teachers and students. According to the state, many approaches commonly used by schools and districts to address the teacher shortage (like increasing class sizes) have likely exacerbated teacher **burnout**, contributing to increased turnover rates. Also, the instability produced by teachers constantly entering and leaving schools **disrupts students' learning**.

The Impact of the Teacher Shortage	
Those hired on an emergency or optional basis “tend to struggle with classroom management, curriculum standards, assessments, and other various aspects of the teaching profession,” resulting in “student outcomes [being] impacted.”	
– Misty Middleton, Superintendent of Bellevue Independent Schools	

3.5. How Kentucky Compares to Other States

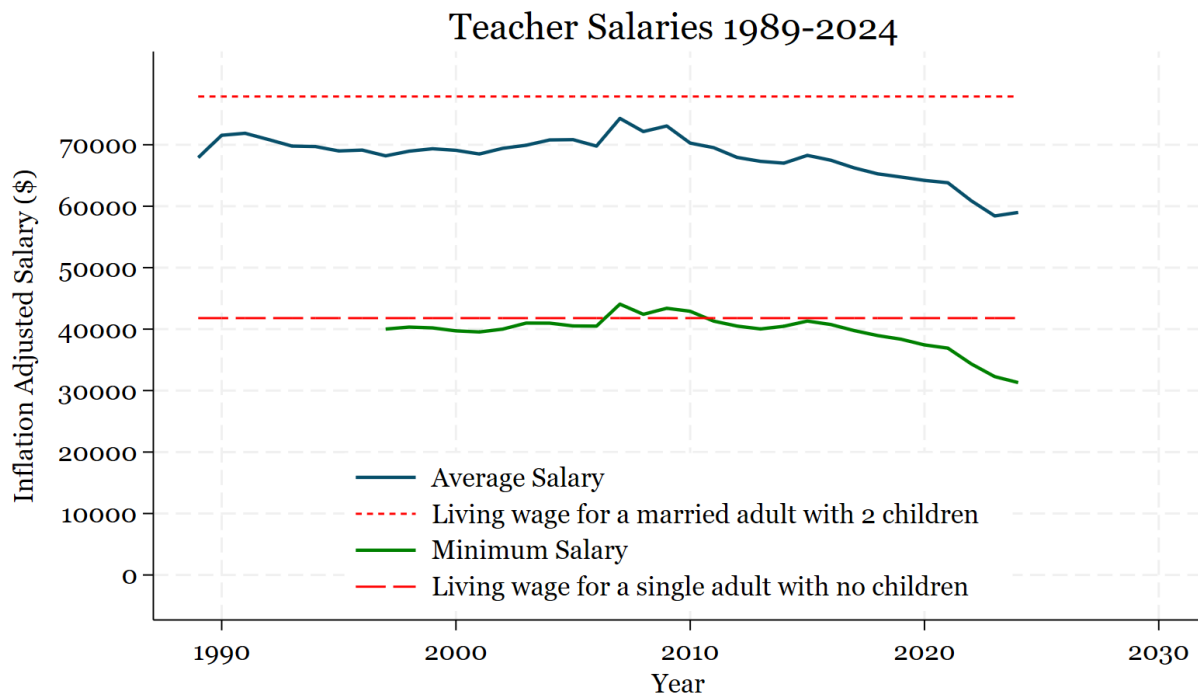
What Kentucky Does	What Other States Do
Kentucky encourages but does not require induction or mentoring support for new teachers.	31 states have laws requiring new teachers to receive 1-2 years of induction and/or mentoring support.
Kentucky recently passed a law allowing student teachers to receive up to a \$5,000 stipend.	Several states provide significantly higher stipends. For example, during the 2023-2024 academic year, Michigan began paying out \$9,600 student teacher stipends.

The Work Ready Kentucky Scholarship Program offers Kentucky students free tuition for up to 60 credit hours towards an associate's degree in certain high-demand workforce sectors. **However, students interested in teaching do not qualify for this program.**

Several states provide **tuition reimbursement** for students pursuing education degrees. For example, Colorado reimburses the cost of community college for education and early childhood education students.

4. Teacher Pay

Adjusted for inflation, **Kentucky teachers are paid less now than at any other point since 1989**. While Kentucky faithfully kept teacher salaries consistent with inflation for many years, **it has largely failed to increase minimums and update teacher pay scales since 2007**, in effect cutting teacher salaries.



Adjusted for inflation, the current average salary is **21% less** than in 2007. The current minimum salary is **32% less** than in 2007. In 2023, **78% of Kentucky teachers felt they were not paid a fair amount for their work**.

School districts decide how much to pay teachers. However, because the state has not raised the minimum salary since 2007, districts are not required to raise their salaries. On top of this, district salaries haven't kept up with inflation. Rowan County's starting salary this year is \$42,100, but that salary was \$46,882 in 2014 when adjusted for inflation. **That's the same as a 10% pay cut over 10 years.**

Teacher Pay in Kentucky vs. Neighboring States				
State	Average Starting Salary	National Rank	Average Salary	National Rank
Illinois	\$45,061	26	\$75,978	13
Ohio	\$40,982	47	\$68,236	22
Virginia	\$48,666	16	\$66,327	26
Tennessee	\$44,897	29	\$58,630	38
Indiana	\$45,007	27	\$58,620	39
Kentucky	\$40,161	48	\$58,325	42
West Virginia	\$42,708	37	\$55,516	48
Missouri	\$38,871	49	\$55,132	49

Teacher pay matters not only because **teachers deserve fair compensation** for their essential work, but also because **higher pay benefits students**. Increasing pay attracts more applicants and improves teacher retention, reducing teacher shortages and allowing educators to build experience in the classroom. It may also draw more qualified individuals to the profession. Supporting teachers with better pay would strengthen Kentucky’s education system and enhance student outcomes.

How Other States Have Raised Teacher Salaries		
Raise Salaries by Law	Codify Inflation Adjustments	Bonuses and Incentives
The Arkansas legislature passed the LEARNS Act in 2023, raising the minimum teacher salary from \$36,000 to \$50,000, a nearly 40% increase.	Teacher salaries in Washington are tied to inflation by law, ensuring automatic, annual increases without new legislation.	In Oklahoma, the state board of education approves teacher bonuses of up to \$25,000 for teachers in counties or in subjects facing shortages.

Teachers in Kentucky don’t get funds from the state to pay for classroom supplies. Some districts, like Fayette County, give a small amount—about \$250—but on average, **teachers spend around \$820 of their own money on classroom supplies every year**.

5. Teacher Training

As acknowledged by KDE, “Research shows that no in-school factors matter more than teaching and leadership, and educators ... need continual opportunities to gain new knowledge and skills.” Research shows that “high quality teachers get an extra year of learning from their students.” During the 2024-2025 school year, roughly **16% of the Kentucky teachers had three years or less of experience**. The first five years of teaching experience “are **critical for new teachers**, as they are the steepest learning curve and the time when it is most likely for them to leave the profession.” This makes professional development, or teacher training, before and after becoming a certified teacher, incredibly important for teacher retention, teacher wellness, and student success.

5.1. Current Teacher Training in Kentucky

KDE is required to “establish, direct, and maintain a statewide program of professional development to improve instruction in the public schools.” KDE must create a four-year teacher professional development schedule, but each local school and district develops its own professional development plan to meet state goals and local needs.

Teacher training can be thought of as two phases: (1) training that happens *before* becoming a licensed/certified teacher (“**pre-service training**”) and (2) training that happens *after* becoming a licensed/certified teacher (“**in-service training**” or “professional development”).

Pre-Service Teacher Training		
Type of Certification	Percentage of Current Teachers	What is it?
Professional and Provisional	93%	Requires college degree or more with relevant coursework, teacher training, and exams . Provisional certificates are issued to new teachers before they receive a professional certification.
Vocational	4%	Certification by relevant job experience , like an electrician certified to teach a shop class.
<u>Alternative</u>	2%	Generally requires a college degree or more, but no degree for teaching . Other training is required.
<u>Emergency</u>	1%	Requires a college degree but no other training; only permitted when no other teachers are available. Emergency certification has doubled since 2020.

Substitute teachers have lower certification requirements. Some of your substitute teachers can have a high school diploma only—no other education required! For more about emergency teacher certification and substitute teaching certification, check out [this link](#).

In-Service Teacher Training
<u>Kentucky</u> requires each local board of education to use four days of the school year for “professional development and collegial planning activities.”

In 2018, the General Assembly **eliminated state funding for professional development**. This zeroed out funding for programs like the Teacher Professional Development Growth Fund, which received \$11 million in 2018 and \$0 every year since.

6. Teacher Diversity

Teacher diversity benefits all students, regardless of students’ backgrounds. Students with diverse teachers have better educational outcomes and are more prepared to live, work, and civically engage in our diverse nation.

For students of color, hiring and retaining **a diverse teacher workforce is essential for educational equity**. Research shows that students of color who have a teacher of the same race perform better in school, are more likely to graduate from high school, and are more likely to attend college.

6.1. Teacher Diversity in Kentucky

“**Diversity**” encompasses a range of factors, including, but not limited to, race, socioeconomic background, and gender. One way to think about the diversity of teachers in Kentucky is to look at the **student-teacher diversity gap**—the percentage of students identifying as a particular diversity factor minus the percentage of teachers identifying as that same diversity factor.

Case Study: Increasing Diversity & Retention in D.C.

Washington, D.C.’s public schools have the nation’s narrowest student-teacher diversity gap at **only 13%**. “In other words, D.C.’s teacher workforce more closely mirrors its student population than in other districts of similar size and student demographics.”

In its efforts to diversify its teacher workforce, D.C. **made teacher diversity a priority** by publishing reports on teacher diversity, establishing teacher preparation pathways, engaging in strategic hiring to increase diversity, and implementing housing and salary incentives to attract individuals from historically disadvantaged backgrounds to the teacher workforce.

Many districts across Kentucky have a significant mismatch between teacher demographics and student demographics. Data from 2018-2019 showed that **57% of Kentucky schools had no teachers of color**. **The Kentucky Teacher Equity Report**, created by the state, shows the gap between Kentucky teacher demographics and those of students:

Race
Although 11% of Kentucky students are Black, just 3% of Kentucky teachers are Black.

Gender
Although roughly half of Kentucky students are male, only 22.8% of Kentucky teachers are male.

Teacher diversity is also important for diverse teachers themselves. Diverse teachers may be better **mentored, supported, and welcomed** by teachers with similar experiences to their own, improving wellness and retention. Yet, in 2019, **60% of Asian teachers and 46% of Latino teachers worked in schools with no other teachers of the same race.**

6.2. Diversity, Teacher Training, and Teacher Retention

Teacher diversity begins with recruiting a diverse teacher workforce to meet the needs of Kentucky students. However, the Office of Education Accountability (OEA) reported that 88% of candidates completing teacher preparation programs between 2014 and 2018 were white. **Only 4.5% of teacher program candidates were Black, and only 1.8% were Hispanic.** The disparities are also stark for gender, with 76% of program completers being female.

Furthermore, the impacts of teacher training and retention disproportionately fall on students from diverse backgrounds. **Teacher “turnover is higher in schools with more low-income students and students of color.”** According to KDE, 39% of economically disadvantaged students were taught by teachers with 0-3 years of experience.

Hiring is not where teacher diversity should stop; research shows that **professional development can impact the retention of diverse teachers**. Although Kentucky made strides toward cultural competency in teacher training by adopting a policy on diversity, equity, and inclusion certification in 2021, that policy no longer exists. In recent years, Kentucky **ended its funding for the Kentucky Academy for Equity in Teaching (KAET)**, a program that prepared diverse educators through training and financial support. Additionally, with the passage of HB 4 in 2025 by the Kentucky Legislature, the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education **discontinued the Cultural Competency Credential Certification process**.

7. Teacher Wellness

Teacher wellness, or well-being, is a “measure” of an educator’s social, physical, and mental health, as well as their belief that they can do their job effectively. Factors directly impacting teacher wellness include working conditions, feeling empowered to do their jobs effectively, compensation, recognition for their work, workload, professional development, work-life balance, and mental health support.

7.1. Why Teacher Wellness Matters

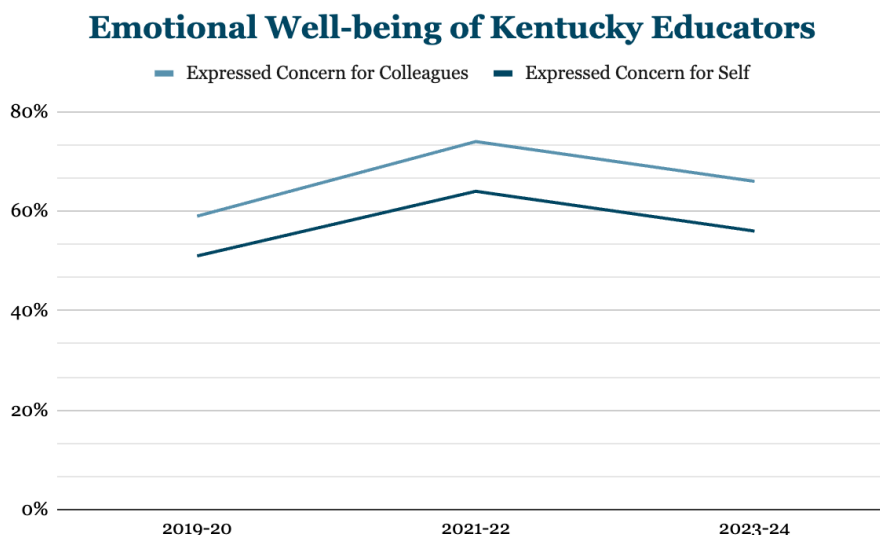
Research consistently shows that supporting teacher well-being benefits the entire educational ecosystem: teachers perform better, student engagement improves, and overall school climate strengthens. **Supporting teacher wellbeing is thus not only a moral imperative but also key to fostering a positive learning environment for students.**

7.2. The Teacher Experience in Kentucky

KDE conducts the biannual Impact Kentucky survey to better understand the educator experience. The survey includes questions about teacher wellness, measured by educators’ concern for their own and their colleagues’ well-being.

From the 2023-24 survey, **66%** of respondents expressed concern about the emotional well-being of their colleagues and **56%** expressed concern about their own emotional well-being. Even before the pandemic, a majority of educators reported concern about both their own and their colleagues’

well-being, **signaling deeper, long-standing issues** in how Kentucky supports teacher wellness.



7.3. Policies Affecting Teacher Wellness

Kentucky’s Department of Education provides [a page of resources](#) focused on employee wellness. But those resources are limited to three third-party programs, the links to two of which are broken and lead nowhere. Kentucky does not have many laws targeting teacher wellness, though 2025’s Senate Bill 9 standardizes teacher sick leave and requires schools to provide at least 30 days of maternity leave to teachers by 2030. **In effect, the state has delegated to school districts the creation and funding of teacher wellness programs.**

8. SB 181 and the Teacher-Student Communication Policy

Earlier this year, the General Assembly passed SB 181. SB 181 mandates that Kentucky school employees and volunteers use only designated traceable communication systems—such as school-approved apps or emails—to contact students. Parental consent is required for other forms of communication.

SB 181 is the General Assembly’s response to [concerns over educator sexual misconduct](#). The bill was passed unanimously by the General Assembly and signed into law by legislators hoping to make students safer by ensuring transparency and accountability in electronic interactions.

8.1. Key Points

- **Unauthorized electronic communication encompasses personal emails, text messages, social media messaging,** or any other notification and communication programs outside of the traceable communication system.
- Parental consent is required for any communication outside approved systems.
- Staff may communicate with immediate family members without parental consent.

- Principals must notify parents about approved communication programs.
- **Teachers can be disciplined up to and including firing for violating this law.**

8.2. *Practical Challenges and Criticisms*

While SB 181 aims to safeguard students, its implementation has faced criticism from educators and community members:

- **Overly Broad Scope:** SB 181 limits communication even in non-school-related contexts, such as in church groups or non-school related extracurricular activities.
- **Family Communication Restrictions:** Some educators are required to obtain parental consent to communicate with their own family members who are not covered by the bill's family member exception, such as stepchildren.
- **Implementation Challenges:** The law's requirements are confusing, particularly on how to handle parental consent and the use of approved communication platforms.

8.3. *Why SB 181 Matters*

SB 181 marks a major policy initiative, demonstrating that the Kentucky legislature can act decisively to address issues in Kentucky schools. But the bill also moved quickly, with limited input from educators and students on how its provisions would play out on the ground. The result is a law that, while well-intentioned, has made teaching and learning more complicated without addressing deeper, systemic challenges facing Kentucky classrooms, like declining literacy rates, inadequate civics education, and record-low student mental health.

SB 181 shows that lawmakers *can* make big changes in Kentucky's school system. **What could be possible if that same urgency were directed toward working *with* educators and students to tackle the everyday problems facing Kentucky's schools?**

9. Reflection Questions

- How has the teacher shortage in Kentucky impacted learning experiences in your school?
- How has your school or district attempted to address the teacher shortage?
- How often are classes in your school taught by substitute teachers? Are any taught by long-term subs?
- Have any teachers at your school taught classes with little or no training in the class's subject?
- How have you seen burnout affecting teachers in your school?
- Have you heard others positively or negatively discuss the possibility of a career in education? What were some reasons for either side?
- What would you say to a friend considering a career as a teacher in Kentucky?

10. Expert Profiles

These experts will testify at KSVT's hearing on educator retention and wellness, and KSVT student examiners will question them about solutions to the crises discussed above.

10.1. Allison Slone

Allison Slone is a special education teacher at The Rowan Academy, founder and administrator of Kentucky Teachers In The Know, founder of KYREADS, 2024 KEA Teacher of The Year, and the first active teacher to be appointed to the Kentucky Board of Education.

10.2. Christina Frederick-Trosper

Christina Frederick-Trosper is a Kentucky public school teacher who has become known for her activism, primarily concerning issues affecting educators and public education in the Commonwealth.

Christina has spoken out publicly regarding proposed legislation and state policies that she believes negatively impact the education system. Most notably she gained state and national recognition during the fight for the preservation of the Kentucky Teacher Pension system. Her participation in the movement to protect teacher pensions was featured in the Emmy Nominated, 2018 FRONTLINE documentary *The Pension Gamble*, which covered the volatile fight over pensions in Kentucky.

A tireless advocate for her peers and her students, Christina applies the lessons she teaches her students into real-world action.

Christina currently resides in Barbourville with her husband, Josh and their children Harrison and Caroline. She also has one adult son, Seth who was the catalyst for her activism.

10.3. Jaylee Collier

Jaylee Collier is an aspiring educator from Letcher County, Kentucky. Jaylee is currently a student at Morehead State University. She studies Mathematics with an emphasis in Secondary Education. Jaylee is an active advocate for public education—particularly in rural Appalachian Kentucky—where she focuses on ensuring that every student and educator has access to meaningful support systems that promote wellness and long-term success.

Jaylee currently serves as a leader for the National Education Association (NEA), the Kentucky Education Association (KEA), and Appalachian Future Educators (AFE). In these roles, she has the privilege of representing educators at all levels: from aspiring to retired, and on local, state, and national platforms. Her work centers on elevating the voices of educators and future educators, particularly of those in rural communities, to ensure that their challenges and triumphs are reflected in policy discussions and systemic reform.

10.1. Mary Slone

Mary Slone is an educator from Floyd County, Kentucky. After graduating from Berea College, Mary chose to return to the community that had breathed life into her and began teaching. Thirty-one years later she has been a finalist for Teacher of the Year, completed National Board Certification and trained as a Master Practitioner for the global organization Narrative 4. Mary is also a lover of Ray Bradbury and a FANatic for UK, the Cincinnati Reds and the Floyd Central Jaguars.