

AMERICAN RESCUE PLAN

improving cradle-to-career outcomes

Partners for Rural Impact (Louisville, Ky.)

Outcomes:

Third-grade reading, middle grade math, postsecondary enrollment



Insights and Impact:

69% of participants showed improvements in reading

74% showed progress in math

The Appalachian counties of Eastern Kentucky seem to have little in common with the city of Louisville. Covering thousands of miles, the counties climb over forested mountains and plunge into deep hollows, causing many residents to live in relative isolation. The region virtually defines “rural,” and nearly all residents are white.

The neighborhoods of Louisville’s West End, by contrast, are tightly packed, with apartments and multi-family houses on small lots. Most residents of these neighborhoods are Black.

Intergenerational poverty

But one thing that these geographically, culturally and racially distinct places have in common is entrenched, intergenerational poverty. This shared challenge prompted three partners, with support from StriveTogether, to combine forces in a partnership that has won them a \$9.2 million federal grant to improve the education and well-being of young people in Kentucky.

The group — Cradle to Career Network member Partners for Rural Impact (formerly Partners for Education at Berea College), Save the Children and the Louisville Urban League — came together in 2020 to influence the state’s deployment of funds allocated under the American Rescue Plan Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief plan (ARP ESSER). The group agreed they could present a stronger case together than any of them could make alone. “We didn’t need a new program,” said Amanda Smithson of Save the Children. “We just needed to collaborate.”

Under the federal guidelines, part of the funds was to be distributed directly to school districts, and 10% were to go to the state, which would then determine how to divide the money.



Cradle to Career Network member Partners for Rural Impact is building a better future for young people.

Once the federal funds were secured in August 2021, the partners — two of whom already had substantial support from the philanthropy Blue Meridian Partners — worked together to make their case to the state. Their award was announced in early 2022. “They gave us everything we wanted,” said Smithson. “It was a really happy day.”

Reversing learning loss

The grant funds, which will be evenly split between the regions, are being immediately deployed to stop and reverse student learning loss at a time when the

COVID-19 pandemic has greatly exacerbated existing challenges. In Appalachia, those challenges include family illness, high unemployment, opioid addiction, and lack of transportation and child care. With COVID-19, these barriers now included closed schools and poor-to-nonexistent internet access — both of which prevented many students from engaging with learning.

Young people in Louisville face many of the same challenges in a more compressed setting, along with the racial tensions sparked by the fatal police shooting of Breonna Taylor and an uptick in violence. Nearly all of the Louisville service area has annual income below 80% of the national household median. Both regions have seen significant declines in student learning and an increase in absenteeism and drop-out rates. Statewide, school age learning losses in the 2019-20 school alone averaged 121 days in reading 172 days in math.

To reverse these slides, the partners have put in place initiatives that are serving about 70,000 children in 31 Appalachian counties and 70,000 children in and around Jefferson County, which is home to Louisville.

The Louisville Urban League is building on its Equitable Educational Engagement (E3) initiative, which is aimed at closing achievement gaps that start in kindergarten and widen throughout the school years. The initiative includes programs to help boys and young men of color gain literacy skills through chess and martial arts; reading support for third to eighth graders; and tutoring and mentoring for children in second through eighth grade, all with support for social and emotional learning. In addition, the Urban League's Polaroid Project supports students' mental health in the face of racism as they photograph examples of peace and justice. The project showcases their perspectives and skills while teaching them about photojournalism. The Urban League has also transformed a contaminated lot in an impoverished neighborhood into a top-notch sports and learning complex that serves as the hub of some E3 programming.

With the new ESSER grant, the Urban League will do even more. The funds will give students in poverty access to existing private tutoring services, such as Mathnasium, that ordinarily are priced out of reach. And the League will supplement the tutoring services' purely academic instruction with culturally attuned social and athletic activities that enhance students' social and emotional development. "With [pronounced] increases in anxiety and depression, we can't afford to focus on just math and reading," said Sadiqa Reynolds, president and CEO of the Louisville Urban League.

Improving outcomes

In Southeastern Kentucky, meanwhile, Partners for Rural Impact has built a powerful infrastructure and cultivated longstanding relationships with stakeholders throughout the region, including school districts in 31 counties. A key partner is Save the Children, whose early childhood and education programs work to boost achievement among marginalized youth. Summer learning, social-emotional support, literacy and math tutoring, preparation for kindergarten readiness, home visits — all these efforts have had measurable impact in the region. Programs have given young people the equivalent of 5.1 more months of schooling. 69% of participants showed improvements in reading, and 74% showed progress in math.

Now the need for this kind of support is greater than ever. Partners for Rural Impact is working with Save the Children and with school leaders to increase the frequency and duration of their cradle-to-career supports. Partners for Rural Impact has piloted a virtual college coaching program and will use ESSER funding to help more high schoolers complete the FAFSA, visit college campuses, and graduate with a clear plan for college and career.

The interventions in both places are based on evidence of their effectiveness, determined through practices of continuous improvement that aim to expand what's working and rethink what is not.

The partnership is giving leaders insights into regions and cultures that were not traditionally seen as allied. It's also a reminder, they say, that efforts to solve social problems can too often be stymied by competition for resources, when the better path is a unified one. "It's easy to get caught up in the polarization," said Gentry. "I think the core message is that when children and families are in poverty, their lives are not very different at all."

Gentry says that the connection with Louisville has made her realize that her duty extends beyond Appalachia. "I have a responsibility, if I am doing work in rural America, to also be partnering to ensure that kids in urban America are also supported. We can't just put our heads down and look at our place. I think there is this moral imperative to also look at other neighborhoods in places surrounding us, and work to ensure that no child in the country is marginalized before they grow up. The other piece is that as Louisville rises so do we. If we are looking at moving state policy or federal policy, the more of us who are working together, the more it will impact the whole."