

when rural  
and urban  
communities  
advocate  
together,  
**every child  
benefits**

StriveTogether is leveraging learning and insights to help build effective statewide policy coalitions that have become instrumental as ARPA resources are directed to where funding will have the biggest impact.





## "We didn't need a new program. We just needed to collaborate."

– Amanda Smithson, senior director, Public Partnerships at Save the Children



*Partners for Rural Impact focuses on helping children in rural places achieve success.*

This shared conviction prompted Cradle to Career Network member Partners for Rural Impact to work with Save the Children and the Louisville Urban League to secure a \$16 million federal grant to improve the education and well-being of young people across the state. "We didn't need a new program," said Amanda Smithson of Save the Children. "We just needed to collaborate."

StriveTogether began laying the groundwork for this state-level policy collaboration by convening network members and other community-based groups in 2018. The organization has invested in and provided technical assistance to statewide cradle-to-

career policy coalitions in states including Texas, Washington, Minnesota, California and Wisconsin that leverage the shared priorities of urban and rural communities to improve outcomes in equitable ways.

In 2019, this work helped inform StriveTogether's investment in Kentucky: providing funding and coaching for a state cradle-to-career policy coalition, anchored by Partners for Rural Impact and Save the Children.

In accomplishing more together than they could alone — in winning this substantial grant from the American Rescue Plan

Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief plan (ARP ESSER) — the Kentucky partners executed on StriveTogether's commitment to collective impact. They made the most of StriveTogether's codified learnings, as well as convenings of representatives of multiple sectors. Their collaboration across race and geographical lines was key to helping secure funding.

In short, StriveTogether helped create the statewide civic infrastructure that in 2020 made it possible for a range of stakeholders to align resources and efforts in a powerful collective response to the pandemic and the learning challenges that remain.

# Louisville



*The Louisville Urban League works to ensure all young people have the opportunity to lead healthy and productive lives.*

**The historic riverside city of Louisville, Kentucky, is home to elegant old homes, several Fortune 500 companies and a famous horse race. Because of systemic and structural racism, it is also a deeply segregated metropolis. Opportunities for white and Black residents stand in such sharp contrast to one another that in 2020, the city's mayor declared racism to be a public health crisis.**

According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, more than a quarter of Louisville's Black residents live in the west side neighborhoods where poverty rates range from 20% to more than 80%. In these neighborhoods, grocery stores and drug stores are few and unemployment is high (18% of Black people with a high school degree are unemployed, compared with 6% of white people). In Louisville overall, Black residents with

bachelor's degrees earn a median salary of \$44,283, whereas their white college-educated peers earn \$57,307 — a difference of nearly 30%. On another key measure, life expectancy, Black residents live 12 fewer years than white residents.

Educational disparities, perpetuated by systems designed to benefit white students in Louisville and Jefferson County, are stark

as well, appearing before kindergarten and continuing. Just 49.5% of Black students in Jefferson County are considered kindergarten-ready, whereas 57% of white students are. In the elementary years, twice as many white public school students (60%) scored proficient or above in reading in 2017 than did Black students.

The gaps are just as wide in the later school years. According to the Louisville Courier Journal, 34% of Black graduates in 2019 were considered college- or career-ready, compared with 69% of white graduates. Again, twice as many white students as Black students got the academic preparation they deserved. In Louisville, 26.1% of young Black adults age 16 to 24 are not working or in school, compared with just 8.5% of their white counterparts. According to the Courier Journal, that gap is the largest among the nation's roughly 100 most populous metro areas.

Against this backdrop, Louisville has hardly

escaped the national epidemic of gun violence: The city ended 2021 with a record 188 homicides.

One of those victims was Breonna Taylor, the 26-year-old hospital worker who was killed in 2020 by Louisville police officers executing a no-knock search warrant. The incident, along with police shootings of Black people elsewhere in the nation, provoked widespread civil unrest, prompting a citywide reckoning over racial injustice and its resulting social ills.

As the city has taken concrete steps to combat those social problems, the Louisville Urban League has played an essential role.

For more than 100 years, the Louisville Urban League has been battling seemingly intractable problems and the systemic racism that leads to them. The organization, with its many public and private partners, has succeeded on multiple fronts, with place-based efforts to give all young people equal

opportunities for healthy and productive lives.

Through its Equitable Education Engagement (E3) initiative, the Urban League works with young people and their families to close opportunity gaps through a variety of cradle-to-career supports such as guidance for parents of pre-kindergartners, peer mentoring and tutoring for elementary and middle schoolers, college preparation and career exposure for high schoolers, and internships and externships for students after high school.

In 2021, despite the considerable disruptions of COVID-19, which hit Black communities particularly hard, and the racial turmoil following the police shootings, the Urban League served more 325 students through these educational programs, delivering more than 400 hours of instruction. All of the seniors in the group graduated from high school, and 95% of them started college in the fall.



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But the legacy of the pandemic has been harsh. Before the pandemic, just 30% of Black and Latine children in Louisville were reading at grade level, and no more than 20% were proficient in math. This year, experts say these numbers will be markedly lower. The proficiency rates are not failings of intellect; they are the failings of multiple systems. With the ESSER funds, the Urban League is working to address these barriers through a

combination of academic tutoring and social-emotional supports specifically aimed at academic recovery across the grades.

In “We Read to Lead,” a program developed during the pandemic when students were attending school remotely, the Urban League addressed a crucial period in educational development by providing third through fifth graders with free, culturally relevant

books, delivered to their homes along with care packages of other supplies. Student volunteers and professional facilitators guided online discussions, encouraging students to read aloud and share their views of the stories. The organization made more than 300 home visits during the pandemic.

The Louisville Urban League recognizes that students in poverty may need academic help in addition to social and emotional supports to enhance their learning and to keep them engaged. So programs help students gain literacy skills while they are also learning chess, for instance, or practicing martial arts. Meanwhile, the Polaroid Project, bolstered by the family of an AP reporter killed while photographing the social justice movement, supports students’ mental health in the face of racism by having students photograph examples of peace and justice. The project showcases the students’ perspectives and skills while teaching them about photojournalism. “We try to pour into them what the world squeezes out,” says Sadiqa Reynolds, the Louisville Urban League’s president and CEO. “We also want to give them a safe place to display and deposit their pain.”

Many of the Urban League’s activities take

*The Louisville Urban League provides academic, social and emotional supports to students.*



**"With [pronounced] increases in anxiety and depression, we can't afford to focus on just math and reading."**

– Sadiqa Reynolds, president and CEO, Louisville Urban League

*Federal funds will enhance and expand the Urban League's educational and wraparound services.*



place in a new state-of-the-art sport, health and learning complex that has transformed the site of an abandoned tobacco processing plant and helped revitalize the surrounding area. The League raised \$47 million of the \$53 million needed for its construction.

With the infusion of ESSER funds, the Urban League will enhance its educational and wraparound services and expand them to more young people and families. Making up for pandemic-related learning loss is at the top of the agenda. Reynolds says the funds will give underprivileged students free access

to private tutoring services like Mathnasium, Kumon and ACT prep that would normally be priced out of reach for many families. "We didn't need to recreate the wheel, but we wanted our children to have access to the same quality educational tools that middle- and upper-income kids have," said Reynolds.

Importantly, the Urban League will also go one step further: It will supplement the tutoring services' purely academic instruction with culturally attuned social and athletic activities that improve students' academic engagement and enhance their social and

emotional development. "We say we'll pay for this tutoring, but we will require you to come to the Urban League twice a week ... for the Polaroid Project, bowling, trips to museums and colleges, mentoring. Or you can go play basketball at the community center," said Reynolds. "With [pronounced] increases in anxiety and depression, we can't afford to focus on just math and reading."

According to Reynolds, 100 students were enrolled in a program that can now afford to serve 1,000 more.



# Southeastern Kentucky



*Partners for Rural Impact provides cradle-to-career wraparound services to youth across eight counties.*

**Although it is miles, mountains and a culture away, Eastern Kentucky shares many of the hurdles that Louisville presents to youth and families trying to break the cycle of poverty. The region also has distinct problems of its own. In contrast to Louisville, the face of poverty in this Appalachian region is rural and distinctly white, and, partly because of its economic history and rugged terrain,**

**on many key measures it ranks as one of the most challenging places to live in America.**

**E**astern Kentucky is an area of spectacular natural beauty, of steep and densely wooded mountains that slope down to rushing streams. For generations, coal mining was the lifeblood of the region, providing decently paying, though highly dangerous,

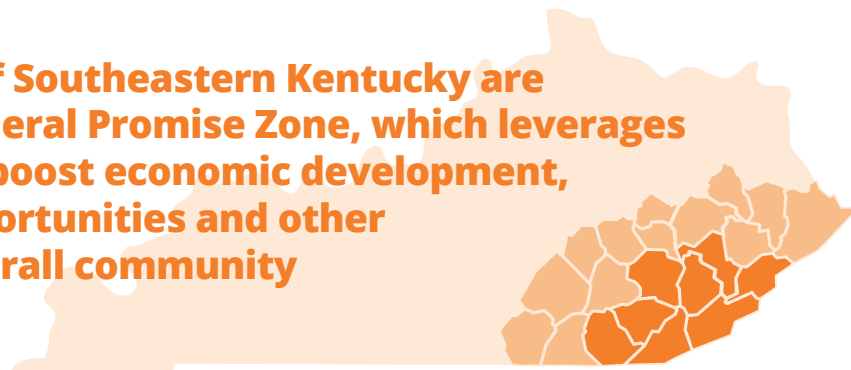
jobs that supported most families directly or indirectly. But over the past several decades, most of those coal mining jobs have disappeared, and partly because of the difficult geography and inaccessibility to interstate highways, the region has struggled to bring in the industry needed to replace them. The holes left by the departing coal companies only added to what already was significant economic hardship.



Home to some of the most impoverished counties in the nation, Appalachian Kentucky has also been hit hard by the opioid epidemic and methamphetamine abuse. According to the federal Appalachian Regional Commission, the mortality rate for drug overdoses in Harlan County alone is more than double the national average, with 54.3 deaths per 100,000 residents. And access to health care and healthy food, while improving, remains a significant challenge. One study put male life expectancy here at seven years below the national average.

The impact of these systemic failures in educational, justice and health care systems results in children growing up in households in which drug use has incapacitated, incarcerated or claimed the lives of their parents, leaving them in foster homes or in the care of grandparents or, not uncommonly, great-grandparents. Statewide, 9% of Kentucky youth live with someone other than their parents — the highest rate in the nation.

**Eight counties of Southeastern Kentucky are designated a federal Promise Zone, which leverages investments to boost economic development, educational opportunities and other measures of overall community well-being.**



Yet as much as the residents of Appalachia dislike the perennial recitation of these hardships — and refuse to be defined by them — the statistics have attracted the attention of policymakers, lawmakers and nonprofit organizations who understand that the blame for these ills lies with systems, policies and practices that have been failing the region for decades. And those failures became even more pronounced during the pandemic. They also know that these entrenched problems must be addressed in a holistic and collaborative way. It is for this reason, for instance, that eight counties of Southeastern Kentucky are designated a federal Promise Zone, which leverages investments to boost economic development,

educational opportunities and other measures of overall community well-being.

Partners for Rural Impact takes the same place-based approach. Formerly known as Partners for Education, the organization was until 2022 affiliated with Berea College, itself an institution with a deep commitment to the future of Appalachia's young people. Serving students who come largely from the region, Berea is a 167-year-old private college that all students attend tuition free, thanks to robust work-study programs and a generous endowment and other funders. Since its founding in 1999, Partners for Rural Impact has grown to an annual budget of \$45 million, funded heavily by federal government grants,



Since its founding in 1999, Partners for Rural Impact has **grown to an annual budget of \$45 million**, funded heavily by federal government grants, and **provides opportunities for more than 50,000 rural youth**.

## Along with Partners for Rural Impact's growing capacity and extensive partner networks has come an impressive record of success.

Third grade reading and math show increases from the 2013-2014 school year to the 2018-2019 school year.



third grade math proficiency

38.5% to **48.6%**



third grade reading proficiency

51% to **59%**

College readiness show increase from the 2012-2013 school year to the 2015-2016 school year.



college readiness

41.3% to **59.5%**

*The above improvements spanned the entire "Promise Zone."*

and provides opportunities for more than 50,000 rural youth.

The original mission was to improve access to college for Appalachian youth. But a few years in, says Dreama Gentry, the organization's president and CEO, the organization's leaders realized they needed to improve not just college access but also students' chances for college success. And they saw that the path to postsecondary success starts in early childhood. "We used to start in the sixth grade, but we realized that that was too late," says Gentry. Thus, multiple partners now serve children with wraparound services from cradle to career.

One key partner is Save the Children, the organization founded in the 1930s to help struggling young people during the Great Depression. Save the Children now works with Partners for Rural Impact to conduct home visits to parents with children from infancy to age 5. With its Early Steps to School Success, the organization trains community volunteers to be parent educators, teaching parents how to prepare their children for kindergarten by showing their children how to recognize letters, numbers and patterns and how to build curiosity. "They give them the high-touch support they need," says Gentry.

Many preschoolers in Southeastern Kentucky qualify for federal Head Start programs but getting to the program sites can mean rides of an hour or more each way, a trip that effectively eliminates this option for many families. So, through a program originally developed by Gentry, the buses come to them. Known as Rosie and Sunny, the colorfully painted buses are essentially preschools on wheels, bringing children books, art projects and chances to learn and interact with trained teachers. For parents in these remote areas, they bring opportunities for child development advice.

Along with Partners for Rural Impact's growing capacity and extensive partner networks has come an impressive record of success. In the area in which its work; concentrates, for instance, third grade math proficiency has gone from 38.5% to 48.6%, and third grade reading proficiency has improved from 51% to 59%. In Leslie County, college readiness has jumped from 49.4% to 60.1%.

The organization's capacity and continuing promise as a place-based changemaker has attracted strong national and local funding, which it has continuously leveraged into steady support. As with the Louisville Urban League, it has demonstrated that it will be a



highly effective deployer of the ESSER funds.

As in Louisville, job one in Southeastern Kentucky is providing students with catch-up support. Months of remote learning or absence from school has added to the trauma of the pandemic, which cost not just learning here but lives. “They have suffered tremendous learning loss, with 50% at proficiency now down in the 20s again,” says Gentry. “Our big push is intervention and supports to regain the loss and connect to keep them reengaged with school.”

Partners for Rural Impact has a 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.



*Federal funds will ensure more children across Eastern Kentucky have access to academic tutoring, counseling and other supports to address learning loss and trauma from the pandemic.*

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. With help from Teach For America recruits, the rural team will boost counseling, academic tutoring and other support for high schoolers to address learning loss and the

trauma of the pandemic. Summer learning camps are part of this effort as well.

Says Smithson of Save the Children, “When my kids had to be pulled out of school, I did all that I could to continue their educations, with a retired teacher in a learning pod. But none of those resources were available to these kids. It hurts my heart.”

Now, thanks to the ESSA funding, many more Eastern Kentucky kids will have these kinds of opportunities.

# winning the grant



*The federal stimulus bill represented a rare and extraordinary influx of federal dollars at a time when the Kentucky partners especially needed it.*

**Although the Urban League and Partners for Rural Impact were allied in their interests and knew each other for other common purposes, they had never actually worked together. But both organizations have substantial funding from Blue Meridian Partners, a national philanthropy that aggregates capital to invest in organizations based on their performance and develops strong**

**relationships with co-investors. It gives social service organizations the funding, the freedom and the time to refine and implement their strategies over the long term, allowing them to break down more of the barriers that trap young people in poverty. In 2021 the Urban League and Partners for Rural Impact had been working with Blue Meridian to design deep and enduring partnerships**

**to bring even greater resources to their respective regions.**

**“W**e started to connect because we both had received investment from Blue Meridian that put us on the same Zoom screen, and we thought, hey, we should connect, and we started sharing what we were doing,” says Gentry. “I do think it was that external partner investing in both of us



# "We got everything we wanted. It was a very happy day."

– Amanda Smithson, senior director, Public Partnerships at Save the Children

so we started thinking about ways that we can work together, and that was around the same time that with Save the Children we started thinking about asking the state for an investment in the work. That is the power that funders and investors have, by investing in multiple entities in the same geography."

The Blue Meridian support helped the partners make the case that they had the capacity, the know-how and the mutual trust to deploy the ESSER money wisely and well. It was important, too, that Partners for Rural Impact has been rigorously tracking population-level indicators of youth and family success for over a decade. This longitudinal ability to evaluate strategies' effectiveness meets a key evaluative need of ARP funding.

The federal stimulus bill represented a rare and extraordinary influx of federal dollars at a time when the Kentucky partners especially needed it. And even before they got together, the partners kept a close eye on the stimulus bill from the moment it was introduced. "The government was throwing money at the

states to keep the economy going and to head off challenges from the pandemic, and we wanted as much of that money as possible for the work that we do to make a difference for children," said Smithson.

The organizations were watching several potential funding streams in particular — the Governors Emergency Education Relief (GEER) fund and the Elementary and Secondary Emergency Relief fund (ESSER) — because they were targeted at children. The former was designated for school-age children, whereas ESSER funds could also be used for preschoolers.

Save the Children and the then-Partners for Education had already collaborated on some initiatives in the rural space, and as they talked on various conference calls, they noted that pandemic-related learning loss and other COVID-19-related challenges crossed the rural-urban divide. "And we had this powerful idea to get funded no matter where children live," says Smithson. Partners for Education specifically looked for an urban partner and quickly found one in the Urban League. The

decision was made to focus on one urban environment and one rural region, with Save the Children as the fiscal agent. "Our staff is small but mighty," says Smithson.

Under the rules of disbursement, 90% of the ESSER funds were to be distributed directly to school districts, and the remaining 10% would go to the state. The state could keep one percent of that share for administration, so that left 9% of the whole pot available for various nonprofit programs and initiatives. "That was our target," says Smithson.

The partners quickly drew up a draft proposal to share with the Kentucky Department of Education. The department then sent out requests for proposals (RFPs). "We rewrote our grant application based on the RFP, and they ended up very similar," says Smithson. They asked for the grant to be split evenly between the urban and rural areas. "There was a frenzy of six weeks, then we waited for two months," said Smithson. The news of their win came in February 2022. "We got everything we wanted," says Smithson. "It was a very happy day."

# lessons



*The Urban League and Partners for Rural Impact recognized that by working together they could accomplish more for every child in Kentucky.*

**The partnership is giving leaders of these organizations 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 smarter path is a unified one. "It's easy to get caught up in the polarization," says Gentry. "I think the core message is that when children and**

**families are in poverty, their lives are not very different at all."**

**G**entry, herself a Berea graduate and an attorney who grew up in a low-income family in the region, 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."



**"It's important not to look at the deficit piece; it's the asset piece, too, and that's what has brought us together. [Reynolds] and I are both from places similar to where we work, and we know the power of intervention and the power of education."** – Dreama Gentry, president and CEO, Partners for Rural Impact

As they do so, the partners know it is important not to dwell on the communities' challenges. Gentry observes: "What is also common about these communities is that they want their young people to be successful, and they have partners working tirelessly to support those young people and their families. It's important not to look at the deficit piece; it's the asset piece, too, and that's what has brought us together. [Reynolds] and I are both from places similar to where we work, and we know the power of intervention and the power of education."

The partners expect to learn much more about each other's communities, and about the strategies for a successful alliance, in the months ahead. "We hope to have lessons to share across the board," says Reynolds. "This could change so much for Kentucky and the country."



*Kentucky is an example of the effectiveness of statewide coalitions actively advocating for policy that supports cradle-to-career outcomes improvement.*





StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: help every child succeed in school and in life from cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. In partnership with nearly 70 communities across the country, StriveTogether provides resources, best practices and processes to give every child every chance for success. The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network reaches more than 14 million students, including more than 8 million children of color and over 6 million children experiencing poverty. The network spans 30 states and Washington, D.C.

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