



Advanced Coursework in Kentucky Schools

Growing access to advanced coursework for every ready student

Kentucky General Assembly Interim Joint Committee on Education

July 6, 2026



Advanced Coursework In Kentucky: Why It Matters



Stronger Outcomes

More college-credit accumulation, higher graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, and college persistence.



Deeper Engagement

Fewer absences, fewer discipline issues, and deeper engagement in school.



Upward Mobility Onramp

Helps students stay on a path that prepares them for college, success in the workforce, and increase their likelihood of substantial economic mobility.



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2025 Advanced Coursework Legislation: HB 190 (KRS 158.6453)



A real commitment - Kentucky set the expectation that qualified students reach rigorous learning

- No later than December 1, 2025, each district (board of education) must adopt an advanced-coursework policy in core subjects (language arts, mathematics, social studies, and science), by grade level, for students in grades 4–12
- The district plan **shall** describe the strategies and approach to advanced coursework or accelerated learning options by grade level for each core subject area;
- The district plan **shall** provide advanced coursework and/or accelerated learning in the four core subject areas for all gifted and talented students in their area(s) of identification;
- The district plan **may** automatically enroll a student who scored distinguished in any content area on the most recent statewide assessment for which scores are available in available advanced coursework for that content area and/or any corresponding content area designated by the local board of education;
- The district plan **may** include eligibility criteria for qualification for available advanced coursework for all other students.



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How Kentucky Defines Advanced Coursework & Accelerated Learning



Per KRS 158.6453

"Advanced coursework" means educational programs or opportunities designed to challenge students with more rigorous content beyond the standard curriculum, including **but not limited to** advanced placement, International Baccalaureate, and honors courses.

"Accelerated learning" means an organized way of helping students meet individual academic goals by providing direct instruction to eliminate student performance deficiencies or **enable students to move more quickly through course requirements and pursue higher level skill development.**



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Building the Foundation That Leads to Post-HS Success & Kentucky's Talent Pipeline



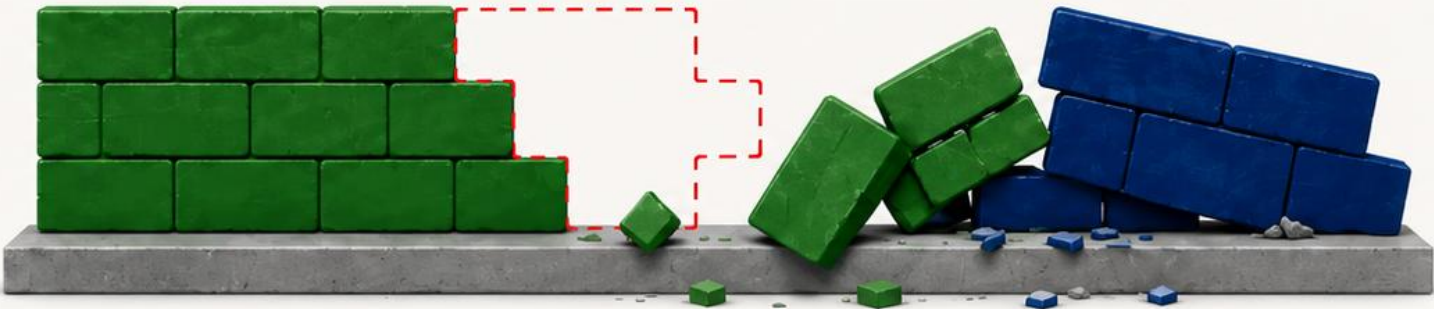
BUILDING FUTURES.

Every piece is essential. Together, they create lasting success.



ONE PIECE MISSING. THE WHOLE STRUCTURE IS WEAKENED.

The foundation has to be intentional at every stage — advanced learning opportunities shouldn't be left to chance or to those who happen to find the door.



STRONG FOUNDATIONS.

STRONGER LEARNERS.

STRONGER COMMUNITIES.



Frontloading Builds the Foundation With Advanced Coursework Opportunities



- Advanced coursework success is built beginning in **elementary school** when students develop critical thinking and academic confidence.
- Advanced learning includes **enrichment, acceleration, project-based learning, and differentiated instruction.**
- **Early** implementation helps identify and nurture talent, supporting **excellence** for all Kentucky students.
- **Frontloading** advanced learning from the elementary years prepares **all students** for rigorous high school coursework.
- Advanced learning should be a **systemwide opportunity for every student.**

Don't Lose the Momentum: Building On HB 190 (2025)



Gaps that remain

- **Reporting:** HB 190 established the framework and requires districts to adopt a plan, but it does not require them to report on whether that plan is producing results — there is no public transparency for if the policy is working or where the gaps are largest
- **Defining Accelerated Learning:** The current definition of accelerated learning focuses on eliminating deficiencies rather than building on student strengths — a framing that can discourage proactive placement
- **Needing Standards for Implementation:** Permissive “may” language leaves implementation inconsistent
- **Access to Algebra I in Middle School:** The gateway to the STEM pipeline – isn’t specifically addressed

Rigorous Middle School Math: The Gateway



By the time students reach 9th grade, many course sequencing decisions have already been made. Research consistently shows that the window for accelerating students into rigorous math pathways closes by early high school years. Waiting until high school to address access is waiting too long.



The STEM gateway

Algebra I by 8th grade leads to calculus, college, and high-demand STEM careers. The stakes are economic, not just academic.



Capable students left out

Approximately 44% of Proficient/Distinguished Kentucky 6th graders DO NOT reach Algebra I by 8th grade.



Middle school is the moment

By 9th grade, sequencing decisions are largely made. The window to accelerate closes by early high school.



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Algebra I by 8th Grade: Uneven Access, Unequal Participation



Geography and Income Gap: The students least likely to reach Algebra I by 8th grade are disproportionately rural and low-income. Enrollment tends to be higher in and around the state's population centers.

0% Enrollment *in 39 districts*

No 8th-graders are enrolled in Algebra I — concentrated in rural and Appalachian areas.

10–30% Enrollment *92 districts where Algebra I is offered*

Where 8th grade Algebra is offered, it reaches only a minority of 8th-graders. **Only 8 districts have enrollments > 50%.** Offering the course isn't the same as broad access.

FRL Gap

in every county that offers it

Where Algebra I is offered, economically disadvantaged (FRL) students enroll below their share of 8th-graders — often by 20–30 points or more.

Source: analysis of Kentucky Department of Education grade 8 Algebra I enrollment and FRL representation, 2024–25

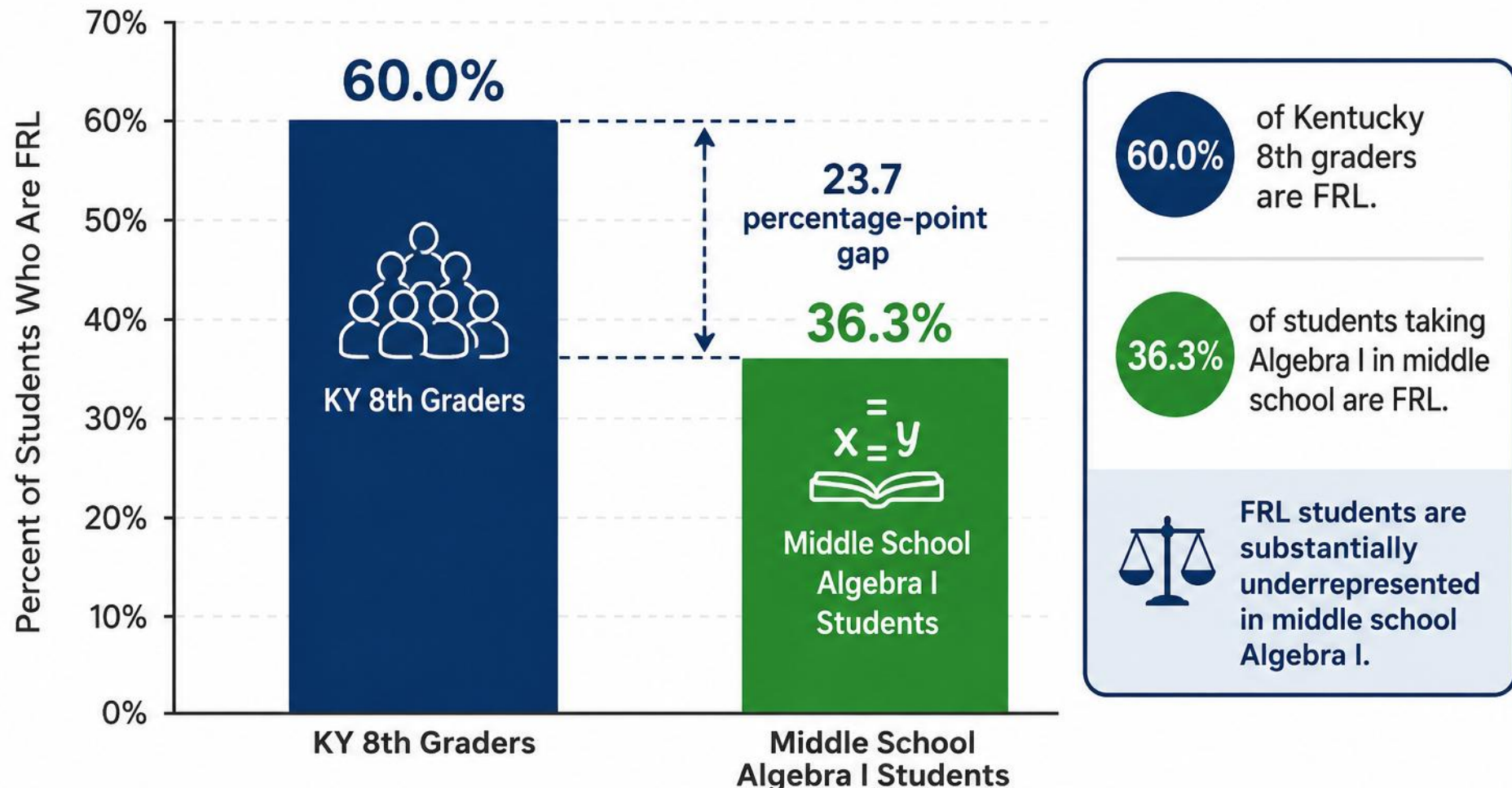


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FRL Students Are Underrepresented in Middle School Algebra I

Comparison of FRL Representation in Kentucky



Automatic Enrollment Best Practices: Lessons From Other States



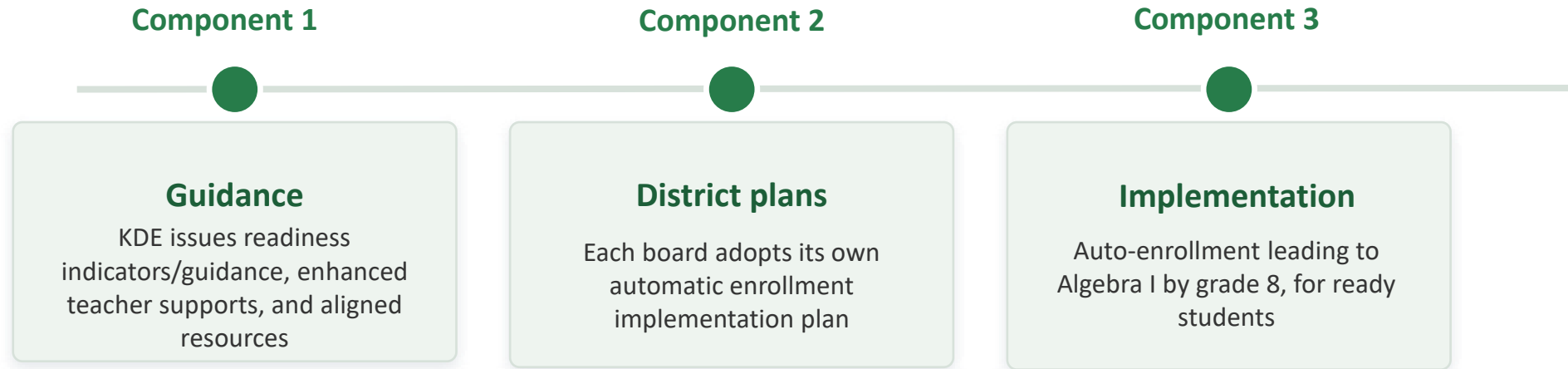
- **More than seven states have enacted automatic enrollment** or guaranteed-access policies for middle school advanced coursework.
- **Fordham Institute National Task Force:** frontloading and automatic enrollment are recommended best-practices for increasing mathematics outcomes
- **Automatic enrollment expands access** by reducing gatekeeping and ensuring academically ready students are not overlooked for advanced math pathways.
- **Default opportunity creates equity:** automatic enrollment helps uncover “hidden talent,” especially among students historically underrepresented in advanced coursework.
- Every model includes a **parental opt-out and multiple ways to qualify** — never a single test score.
- States that invested in **teacher preparedness and data infrastructure** before mandating enrollment see the strongest early results.
- **Objective readiness measures are critical:** outcomes are strongest when placement is tied to demonstrated proficiency, not subjective recommendations.
- **Best practice = access + support:** pairing automatic enrollment with strong elementary and middle school instruction improves success and persistence.



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What Automatic Enrollment Could Look Like



Potential mechanisms:

- Automatically enroll a student who scores distinguished in a content area(s) on the most recent statewide assessment for which scores are available.
- Automatically enroll a student who scores in the “x”th percentile or higher on an interim assessment.
- Automatic enrollment based on multiple opportunities to demonstrate readiness.



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Narrowing Kentucky's Excellence Gap



- Excellence gaps, disparities in high-level academic achievement among student groups, remain a persistent challenge in K–12 education, particularly in access to advanced mathematics learning.
- Enrollment is driven by access, early preparation, lowering of barriers (financial, procedural, cultural), and a standard of excellence.
- Kentucky schools that are performing better than expected and narrowing excellence gaps are signaling it's about coherent systems and strong school cultures – not isolated programs.
- Excellence is not about exclusivity – it should be more widely attainable – particularly for Kentucky to remain economically competitive.
- Coherent systems integrate six conditions: early academic preparation · flexible readiness grouping · embedded teacher professional learning · growth-oriented accountability · psychosocial supports · reduced barriers to advanced coursework.

Source: Bartlett, J., & Hurley, J. (2026). *Narrowing the K–12 excellence gap in Kentucky schools: Lessons on high achievement from high achievers* [Unpublished capstone project]. Martin School of Public Policy and Administration, University of Kentucky.



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