Kentucky’s Portrait of a Learner

Many Kentucky schools and districts have journeyed toward deeper, more personalized learning as a path to equity for all learners. As part of that journey, educational leaders across the commonwealth are developing portraits of a learner—sometimes called portraits of a graduate—to redefine and enhance expectations for preK-12 learners and on into postsecondary. A portrait can serve as an Archimedean lever that ultimately makes the learner experience more personally relevant, engaging, and reflective of the learning and career challenges that students will face in the fast-paced, interconnected, tech-driven world of 2023.

When the Kentucky Board of Education adopted the Kentucky Portrait of a Learner in October 2022, we joined several other states that have adopted state-level portraits. In so doing, we hoped to model the process and cast a vision that embraced the power of locally adopted portraits. It is our hope that all Kentucky districts will follow suit—by defining, communicating, and measuring the skills and dispositions that are critical to student success. Simply put, a portrait of a learner is an agreed-upon set of aspirations for what every learner will know and be able to do when they transition to their next phase.

No matter when students demonstrate a skill named in the portrait—whether it is communication, collaboration, or problem solving—the skill remains constant as learners progress toward it. For instance, third graders can demonstrate collaboration through group projects and activities in school but also in scouting, soccer, church youth group, or afterschool programs. When that skill is assessed at a checkpoint—say at the end of grade 8—teachers will see more nuanced and sophisticated skill development. This progression is akin to what happens from t-ball to coach-pitch baseball to Babe Ruth League and beyond. The skill does not change; kids just get better at it.

Inherent in portrait implementation is a shift to performance-based assessment, in addition to the knowledge-based assessments teachers use most often. In performance assessment systems, teachers use scoring guides and other tools to gauge how students’ skills progress. They give students frequent feedback and opportunities to practice skills, much like students practice sports or rehearse music. Performance assessment systems often culminate with public presentations such as exhibition nights and student-led conferences.

When fully implemented, portraits of a learner become the lever by which teachers, schools, and communities rebalance learning expectations to include a broader, more enduring set of aspirations for content mastery, essential workplace skills employers want, and human qualities that we all want for a global citizenry. The net effect of creating a portrait of a learner with community partners, and putting that portrait in place in every classroom, is that these essential skills and dispositions become as important as the narrow academic content we focused almost exclusively on throughout the No Child Left Behind era. They do not replace academic content; they extend knowledge to relevant, real-world application. Portraits of a learner are a powerful lever for producing the mind-sets and innovation that the world will require.