

CHAPTER 2

Jefferson County (Louisville), Kentucky

- *An irrevocable public school mission:*
“No expulsions. A place that works for every child and youth”
- *Exceptional use of student data to ensure budgetary and academic accountability*

The 1975 merger of the schools of urban Louisville and suburban Jefferson County opened the door to innovative, once-unimaginable programs across a broad span of educational concerns. Thirty years later, the combined system’s continuing drive to bring its students into the economic mainstream is notable for its creativity, inclusiveness, and flexibility. With the public schools in charge—and the definition of student stretched to embrace adults and new immigrants, among others—virtually all the indicators of progress are positive.

Unlike some of its peers around the country, Jefferson County Public Schools (JCPS) has not created a network of ad hoc programs or programmatic band-aids that disappear once financial and/or political backing evaporates. Its efforts to reconnect potential and actual dropouts appear to be very much a permanent part of the JCPS culture. They present powerful evidence that large, urban public school systems can make a strongly positive difference in the lives of otherwise unpromising young people.

Strictly judged, Jefferson County does not warrant a place in this study dedicated to showcasing exemplary dropout recovery programs. Although Jefferson County Public Schools does have large, diverse, and noteworthy programs to engage and reconnect dropouts who wish to earn a regular high school diploma, its highest priority is to ensure that every young person has the kind of flexible and engaging educational program that keeps them in school until graduation. What is most striking about this community is a public school culture that for over a quarter of a century has never expelled a single student. Under at least four different school superintendents and a succession of elected school boards, JCPS has embraced the philosophy that it has an irrevocable responsibility to create an effective educational experience for each and every student.

What JCPS has created is a comprehensive system of noteworthy programs that embrace both

traditional and alternative public schools to meet the diverse needs, interests, and learning styles of different students. As Marty Bell, Deputy to the Superintendent put it: “The foremost factor accounting for JCPS’s success is adopting a philosophy and culture that it is our obligation and commitment to assure every child a quality education. We will not give up on any child. We believe that not every teacher can teach all children, but we do have teachers who can address different student needs. It is our job to get each child in the right program with the right teacher.”

In educational jargon, JCPS is a “managed choice system” with a public mission of graduating every child to high standards, “no matter what it takes.” Said Superintendent Stephen Daeschner: “Our goal cannot be accomplished with a one-size-fits-all instructional program... That is why JCPS offers more than 80 specialized instructional programs designed to stimulate and motivate students to succeed.” Daeschner, the dean of large city superintendents, serving since 1993, emphasizes the challenge this way:

We still have a lot of work left to do, because there are so many needy kids. It is our job to find people who wake up in the morning and go to bed thinking about how to help these kids. It comes down to people, and their vision, passion, will and skill. It’s about the system to put success in place. We tell school leaders if you don’t do it this way, it won’t work. We practice tough love because our systems have been tested and work well for most kids. We did replace a middle school principal recently. She cared about the students, but she had low expectations for them and wasn’t challenging them. We need people who believe that every child can succeed.

An outgrowth of struggles over racial desegregation, the merger in 1975 of the Louisville Public Schools, and those of the surrounding Jefferson County opened new opportunities for excellent

education for students of all races. Today, JCPS offers magnet schools, magnet programs, magnet career academies, specialized programs, open enrollment, free transportation, and whatever else seems advisable both to attain quality and prevent “White flight” and resegregation. Descriptions of several of the County’s options follows.

The Louisville Education and Employment Partnership

Established in 1987, The Louisville Education and Employment Partnership (LEEP) is a collaborative effort of the JCPS, Louisville City Government, Jefferson County Government—now merged with Louisville Metro Government—Greater Louisville, Inc., Metro United Way, and Kentuckiana Works. LEEP grew out of the realization by Louisville’s leaders, including the mayor and city council, that education is the key to economic development. The fact that the Louisville area had a below national average percentage of high school graduates spurred LEEP to undertake its first major education activity.

The Partnership set its mission as assisting those students identified as potential dropouts, specifically by supporting 22 school-based career planners, to keep young people in school, to help them graduate, and to make successful transitions to adulthood. LEEP expresses its goals in quantitative terms: (1) a graduation rate or still-in-school status of 90% or better in grade 12; (2) a dropout rate in grades 9-12 of 4% or less; (3) at least a combined 80% transition rate to postsecondary education, employment, or the military.

JCPS’s record of accomplishment deserves the attention of any who doubt that large, urban public school systems can succeed in graduating almost all of their students. In SY 1998-1999, the County had a dropout rate of 6% (2,381 students). Since then, the County’s dropout rate has fallen to 2.3% (898 students) in SY 2002-2003 and 2.9% (1,179 students) in SY 2003-2004. JCPS graduates, moreover, are making the grade beyond high school. Of the Class of 2004, 64% are in college, 22% are working, 5% are in vocational/technical schools, 5% are in both school and working, 3% are in the military, and only 1% are in neither school nor working.

A Public School System That Refuses to Accept Dropping Out

Kentucky’s largest school district, JCPS has 97,000 students, 13,000 employees, and 151 buildings. All 22 of its high schools are schools of choice, that is, they offer students and parents a wide variety of traditional academic programs as well as magnet and career academies. All general courses in English and mathematics have been eliminated and high state standards are stressed in every school, as is leading-edge educational technology. In 2004, the District was one of five finalists for the coveted Broad Foundation Prize for Urban Education.

Of particular interest in this study are, first, the County’s efforts to hold on to students who, in less supportive school systems, would be disruptive, expelled, and, ultimately, become dropouts and, second, the innovative outreach efforts of the Jefferson County High School (JCHS).

First, JCPS recognizes that often a student’s barrier to success in school comes from what happens beyond the school yard. “Through our partnership programs such as Family Resource & Youth Services Centers and Louisville Education and Employment Partnership,” said Marty Bell, “we try to address these external barriers. It may be clothing to attend school, an alarm clock to wake up, or a drug problem. In any case, services are in place to help the student overcome the barriers and be in school.”

Second, JCHS places great importance on student attendance. With the help of a grant from the state dropout prevention program, attendance advisors also serve as counselors and are often the first to detect students’ problems. Homes are called when students are not in class. Teachers make the first call, the attendance director the next. Gallop for the Goals, an attendance incentive program, conducts drawings and awards prizes for good attendance. Given that JCHS serves a population with many problems, the school’s 80% attendance rate is considered laudable.

What accounts for JCPS’ low dropout rate? Aside from superior instruction, challenging curricula, and competent leadership, credit must go to the school district’s philosophy of “a place for every child and youth.” Recognizing that there are many impediments to successful completion of a high school diploma, JCPS has constructed numerous options for students to meet state and district graduation standards. For example, said Bell, “We always

When we analyzed where our dropouts were occurring, we found many were kids coming back to us from the juvenile justice system. 90% of them subsequently failed to graduate. So, we opened a special school, richly staffed, to receive these kids and prepare them to re-enter our regular schools. Today the graduation rate of adjudicated youth is over 70%.”

—Marty Bell, Deputy to Superintendent

ask: ‘What does our data tell us?’ When we analyzed where our dropouts were occurring, we found many were kids coming back to us from the juvenile justice system. So, we opened a school to receive these kids and prepare them to re-enter our regular schools. We cut the dropout rate of these kids by over 50%.”

One of the most impressive and enviable features of JCPS’s management is its student data system. When a student first enters any school, he or she is assigned an identification number, which tracks that student’s progress, including transfer to another school, graduation, or dropping out. A list of absent students is regularly sent to each principal who is held accountable for those students. Kentucky uses the NCES dropout calculation, which until recently tracked students for 12 months and not just the school year. A student in Grades 9-11 who does not return to school in the fall and for whom there is no record of transfer is considered a dropout. Louisville has such a tight data system that it is able to report on dropout rates for each of the 9th-12th grade cohorts.

Louisville has been collecting this student data, by identification number, for 20 years, so that it can see patterns and make reliable projections for budget planning as well as academic accountability. On the fifth day of the school year, schools count the number of students present, and that amount is projected to the end of the month. The first allocation of funds is based on the count from the fifth day, with the projection to the end of September. Then, in January, there is a redistribution of funding to account

for students who have moved to other schools. The school district has a “hold harmless” provision so as not to take too much money away from any one school. Schools have to lose more than three percent of their students to have their funding decreased, but they gain funds if there is only a one percent increase in attendance.

In this way, the tracking system allows more accurate payments to schools and alternative education sites. Equally telling, it ensures academic accountability and puts JCPS far ahead of many, if not most, other school systems.

As a guide to assessing needed changes in its schools, JCPS’s leadership expends substantial resources on an annual Comprehensive School Survey measuring student attitudes, by school, by race, and compared with District-wide totals. For example, students were asked to rate the following features about school climate and atmosphere on a five-degree scale from agree to disagree:

- Most students obey school rules
- Most students show proper respect for adults in my school
- Adults in my school treat students fairly
- My teachers really care about me as a person
- This school gives students the recognition they deserve
- Overall, I would give my school a grade of ____.

Highly favorable responses predominated in the 2004-2005 survey.

JCPS intentionally uses afterschool time to supplement schooling. Funding from the Charles S. Mott Foundation helped the system to institute school-based afterschool programs, which now number 50. The District partners with groups like the Urban League, Boys and Girls Clubs, Boy Scouts of America, Girl Scouts of America, YMCA, and others. These programs use the Kid Trax system, in which the student uses a programmed plastic card to enter an afterschool program. The District then browses the data to see who is skipping school but attending afterschool programs. Information on test scores, attendance, and truancy is shared with the afterschool program so that club personnel can help students reengage in school. All the partners believe that students who participate in afterschool activities do better in the regular classroom. Louisville’s mayor, Jerry Abramson, has urged all local youth groups to participate in data-sharing with JCPS and even budgets city funds to maintain this data-driven,



A teacher works with a student on eTutorials, an integral part of Jefferson County's mission to reach all students. (Photo courtesy of JCPS)

child/family-centered system.

Kentucky's 1990 School Accountability Act also created Family Resource Centers. Social workers were placed in every low-income school and charged with building links to outside agencies to get children to attend school. One-stop Neighborhood Places, often based in community organizations, offer families a range of assistance, such as child protective services; state, county, city health, and social services; food stamps; and mental health counseling. The eight Neighborhood Places were designed using data on truancy rates. Their sites are located on either school property or other county/city property. There are no turf battles between the school district and the city/county and data is widely shared across agencies.

To ensure that the Neighborhood Places succeed, city leaders have met every Friday morning for the past 13 years. The group includes the Deputy Mayor, Marty Bell of JCPS, representatives from the city health department, state health and human services, and Jefferson County regional directors. Bell reports that, no matter what, this meeting takes place and has led to much cooperation in fulfilling the common mission of helping youth and families to be more successful and healthy.

Some of the other flexible and innovative alternative arrangements that keep Jefferson County students engaged in school rather than dropping out follow:

JCPS eSchool

The JCPS eSchool enables students, including those in private and parochial schools and who are home-schooled, to eliminate course deficiencies or to earn additional credits online with an online teacher. Students pay \$100 per each half-credit course plus the cost of books or CD-ROMs. More than 55 different courses may be studied at the student's choice of time, place, and pace. They are always available worldwide 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

Algebra and reading labs help students reach proficiency from their 6.5-8.5 grade level at entrance. The school is the only one in the state to require a standard achievement test (the TABE) to graduate.

The JCPS eSchool has developed hundreds of single-topic eTutorials in all content areas. Students can complete these in 20-60 minutes each. They review basic concepts, help make up missed work and give teachers diagnostic tools to determine how much students are learning and understanding. Sample eTutorials include: Fahrenheit, Celsius, and Kelvin; Behavior of Gases; Basic Constitutional Principles; Generating Number Sequences; Comma Usage; and Elements of the Short Story. Student grades are based 50% on daily work, 40% on unit and fina

l exams, and 10% on special projects. The number of As and Bs earned helps students win grants under the state's Educational Excellence Scholarship program.

To extend and reinforce its eCourses and eTutorials, eSchool has also developed over 100 eSheets, handouts for teachers to use: "fun learning" activities, reference material (e.g., in science—a periodic table and a review of balancing chemical reactions). Extending its influence far beyond Jefferson County, the District has sold its eMaterials and its curricular workbooks to over 275 school systems in 27 states. (See <http://jcpschool.org>)

Independent Study High School

Up to two credits per year may be earned through correspondence in the Independent Study High School. Persons who have been out of school for at least 10 years may participate and earn up to one-half of graduation requirements, while those over age 21 can earn one-fourth of the requirements through correspondence. Students pay tuition and workbook costs of \$50 per half unit of credit, plus the cost of textbooks. More than 40 courses are offered.

Liberty High School

A nontraditional, “safety net” school for academically unsuccessful students, Liberty High School (LHS) enables them to respond to “a hands-on, collaborative, performance-based, career-oriented, computer-assisted curriculum.” Students participate in a nine-week Discovery Program that teaches essential learning and life skills, including team-building, anger management, problem-solving, conflict resolution, career exploration, chemical dependency, and employability skills. To demonstrate support, parents must also attend Discovery once per week. The school’s Advisor/Advisee Program emphasizes service-learning as well as career assessments, job-shadowing opportunities, and co-op experiences. Liberty graduates must meet or exceed JCPS’s literacy and mathematics standards, and complete a senior project, a writing portfolio, and a service-learning component.

English as a Second Language

Students whose primary language is not English are offered intensive English communication and cultural understanding classes so that they can benefit from JCPS’s comprehensive academic program.

Buechel and Breckinridge Metropolitan High Schools

These schools serve students exhibiting inappropriate behavior (e.g., violence, disruption, drugs) or returning from adjudication with the goal of returning them to regular school. Together, their dropout rate was reduced, over time, from 60.7% to about 25%. Students’ tests scores are attributed to their former comprehensive high school, which creates an incentive for that school to want its students to do well. Principals are not permitted to exclude students in alternative schools or adjudicated youth as a way to raise their average student test score.

Homeless Education Program

This program provides academic services specifically targeted to some 4,850 homeless children and youth, of whom 1,291 are enrolled in Special Education, and 199 in self-contained classes.

Migrant Education Program

Student mobility is a major issue in JCPS; an average of 300 students change schools daily. The Migrant Education Program (MEP) offers computer instruc-

tion, family education, recreational activities, and transportation for about 100 migrant youth, 97% of whom are Latino, and their families. Twelve migrant students are enrolled in Special Education.

Teenage Parent Program

The Teenage Parent Program (TAPP) provides academic, medical, and social services for pregnant and parenting school-age students and their infants up to age four at two locations where Child Development Centers and Co-op Parenting programs are co-located.

An integral part of TAPP is played by career planners from the Louisville Education and Employment Partnership; they teach pre-employment and work-maturity skills and also assist in finding part-time and summer employment for TAPP students.

TAPP follows the curriculum of the JCPS, including middle, high, and precollegiate coursework. Classes taught by nurses are offered in pre-natal/postpartum, family planning, child development, childcare, and parenting skills. Diplomas are awarded either by the student’s home high school or by Jefferson County High School.

College Now!

College Now!, an eLearning partnership between JCPS High School, Jefferson Community College, and three other colleges enables 7,000 students—including some in Iraq and Japan—to earn both high school and college credit for the same course taught by dual-certified teachers. Thirty-three hours of online courses are available at a cost of \$50 per three-hour credit. Students who complete the comprehensive COMPASS survey and one additional course are not required to take remedial classes when they enter college. The Kentucky Community and Technical College System generates a college transcript upon successful completion of the courses.

Jefferson County High School

After the 1980 US Census revealed that 36.5% of the area’s population age 25 and older had not completed high school, JCPS responded in 1986 by inaugurating a new, more flexible model that would appeal to working young adults. The school was originally planned to accommodate 200 students, but over 700 enrolled in the first semester. Even in its first year, the County’s dropout rate fell by 30%.

For adults 21 years of age or older, for young

adults age 16-20 who dropped out of school, and for students at the 9th grade-level or above who meet certain academic criteria and commit to attend classes at least 15 hours a week, JCPS offers further opportunities to earn the high school diploma. Jefferson County High School (JCHS) enables adults to attend the academic classes and online studies at five locations around the County and at times convenient for them. Students may enter at any time and attend classes on a flexible schedule (8-11 a.m., Monday–Friday; 11-2 p.m., Monday-Friday; 6-9 p.m. Monday-Thursday). Motivated students can study three, six, nine, or even 12 hours per day. Classes are open year-round except for brief winter, spring, and summer breaks. A certified teacher and a teaching assistant work with classes averaging 31 students each.

This flexibility enables dropouts to hold a job, meet family responsibilities, and graduate when they have met JCPS's academic standards. These are generally considered rigorous: (e.g., four Carnegie Units of English, three each of science, mathematics, and social studies, with US history being mandatory, and nine other units, totaling 22); attaining 11th grade proficiency in mathematics and reading; and producing a writing portfolio. For new students whose placement pretest shows deficiencies in reading, math, and language, a basic skills class is prescribed to enhance basic skills before the student can earn high school credit.

In SY 2004-2005, 2,200 students attended JCHS's computer-driven, self-paced classes and 299 completed all requirements for the high school diploma. With its eSchool and summer school, JCHS serves about 2.5% of the County's total high school enrollment. Altogether, over 8,000 students have graduated from JCHS since 1986. Thus, JCPS pursues its historic mission of doing "whatever it takes" to help youth and young adults remove the stigma of being dropouts while at the same time attaining reasonably high academic standards.

JCPS is particularly active with programs for older youth and adults. In SY 2004-2005, enrollment in Adult Basic Education was 12,833; Lifelong Learning participants—4,759; ESL adult students, 1,657; GEDS awarded, 879; GED graduates advancing to postsecondary education, 105.

YouthBuild Louisville

Although JCPS is both imaginative and comprehensive in its commitment to serve all youth, there is still encouragement for nonprofit agencies to offer additional pathways for dropouts to join the mainstream. For example, like most communities surveyed in this report, Louisville has an active YouthBuild program. Its current \$1.9 million budget serves 35 current members and provides follow-up assistance for 84 YouthBuild Louisville (YBL) alumni.

Founded in 2000, the nonprofit Young Adult Development in Action, Inc. operates YBL with the assistance of a 45-member agency collaborative. In addition to funding from the US Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) and the City of Louisville, YBL enjoys support from an impressive list of local government agencies, banks, unions, corporations, AmeriCorps, and private foundations, which provide funds, materials, expertise, and public encouragement.

JCPS recognizes YBL as an alternative e-School site, and its Adult Education Office supports the professional instruction of YBL's staff. In return, YBL students and staff provide community service to JCPS middle schools and proctor students for the state tests.

At least 75% of YBL enrollees are school dropouts working for a second chance to turn their lives around. Over 60% of its participants are young parents and 30% are young women. They know that YBL provides not only life skills and hands-on construction experience but also partnerships with Jefferson County Community College and the Jefferson Community and Technical College Systems to provide a "seamless transition" from GED preparation to college and today's world of work. YBL graduates earn AmeriCorps Education Awards which pave the way for further education.

YBL has 10 full-time and six part-time staff and one full-time AmeriCorps volunteer. In an effort to diversify funding, it is taking on fee-for-service projects (e.g., rehabbing homes and community facilities for Metro government and training adult residents of a housing site to work on private construction crews under HUD's Hope VI program). For further information about YouthBuild, see Chapter 17.)

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