

Commonwealth Education Continuum Summary Minutes

August 26, 2026
1:00-3:00 PM EST

Welcome and Opening Remarks

Dr. Aaron Thompson, President of the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE), welcomed members and emphasized the Commonwealth Education Continuum's role in connecting education and workforce efforts across Kentucky.

Dr. Thompson noted that preparing learners for the future requires moving beyond knowledge alone to ensuring students can apply knowledge and demonstrate essential skills. He emphasized the importance of aligning essential skills from early childhood through K-12, postsecondary education and the workforce, including consistent approaches to teaching, developing and assessing those skills.

With artificial intelligence and other technologies rapidly changing the workplace, Dr. Thompson stressed that Kentucky cannot predict every job of the future but can prepare learners with adaptable skills such as problem-solving, communication, collaboration, judgment and critical thinking.

Experiential learning was identified as an important strategy for helping students develop and demonstrate these skills. Dr. Thompson emphasized that meaningful experiential learning should be available to all students and can include internships, apprenticeships, work-based learning, undergraduate research and other applied experiences.

New Member Introductions

The CEC welcomed new members:

- Renee Smith, Superintendent, Jackson County Public Schools
- Steve Trimble, Kentucky Board of Education representative
- Amanda Wickersham, Fayette County Public Schools

Kentucky Workforce and Demographic Trends

John Hughes and Kyle Baltuch provided an overview of demographic and workforce trends affecting Kentucky.

The presentation highlighted the connection between Kentucky's education pipeline and its future workforce. Discussion focused on declining numbers of traditional-age students, changing

workforce expectations and the importance of engaging populations that have historically been outside traditional education-to-workforce pathways.

Members discussed the importance of reaching **disconnected youth**, particularly Kentuckians ages 16–24 who are not engaged in education or employment. Members also noted the significant number of Kentucky adults with some college credit but no completed degree or credential and the opportunity to reconnect those individuals with education and workforce pathways.

The conversation emphasized that Kentucky's workforce strategy cannot rely solely on the traditional high school-to-college pipeline. The state will need strategies that reach adults, disconnected young people and others who could be re-engaged in education and training.

Members also discussed changing expectations among younger generations and the need for employers and educators to understand how younger Kentuckians view careers, work and education. Career readiness, earlier career exploration and stronger connections between education and employment were identified as increasingly important.

Disconnected Youth

Members expressed significant interest in better understanding Kentucky's disconnected youth population. Questions raised included:

- Who are Kentucky's disconnected youth, including their age, geography and characteristics?
- What factors and educational pathways contribute to young people becoming disconnected?
- What happens to students after they leave traditional education systems?
- Where do gaps exist in Kentucky's ability to track these young people?
- How can education, workforce and community partners reconnect them with meaningful pathways?

A specific concern was raised regarding students who withdraw from public schools following chronic absenteeism, disciplinary issues or academic struggles and subsequently enter homeschool settings. Members distinguished this population from families intentionally and successfully choosing homeschooling and suggested examining whether some students may effectively disappear from education and workforce data systems after withdrawal.

Members suggested that the CEC consider a deeper examination of disconnected youth and the pathways that lead to disconnection before considering potential policy responses.

The discussion also recognized adult learners as an important part of Kentucky's talent strategy. Members noted that GED participation is concentrated among adults rather than the youngest eligible population, reinforcing the importance of creating multiple opportunities for individuals to reconnect with education throughout adulthood.

Artificial Intelligence, Skills and Leadership

The discussion addressed how artificial intelligence is changing education and the workforce.

Members emphasized that AI should be considered not only as a technology issue but also through an **investment and leadership lens**. Questions were raised about how Kentucky is investing in AI capacity and preparing leaders across education and workforce systems to guide organizations through technological change.

The conversation reinforced the importance of developing durable or essential skills that remain valuable as technology changes. Members noted that education systems must prepare learners to use AI effectively while strengthening distinctly human capabilities such as critical thinking, problem-solving, communication, collaboration and adaptability.

Work-Based and Experiential Learning

Miles Feroli, CPE, and Alisher Burikhanov introduced a discussion of work-based learning as a strategy connecting education, workforce development and economic growth.

Work-based learning was described as an important opportunity for students to apply classroom learning, develop essential skills and better understand career options before entering the workforce full time. It can also benefit employers by providing earlier connections to potential employees and allowing students and employers to determine whether careers and workplaces are a good fit.

Kentucky has experienced growth in work-based learning opportunities, including registered apprenticeships and career and technical education internships. The discussion emphasized the need to build on that momentum while ensuring experiences are high quality and accessible.

Members also noted that **credit for prior learning** is an important strategy for working adults and should be considered as Kentucky expands work-based learning opportunities.

Work-Based Learning Panel

Panelists included:

Judge Luke King, Cumberland County Judge Executive

Judge King described Cumberland County's youth civic engagement and internship model. The program introduces young people to local government and provides hands-on opportunities that build leadership, civic awareness and workforce skills.

He emphasized that young people can also provide valuable perspectives to employers and community leaders. He shared an example in which young interns helped a prospective employer better understand how to communicate employment opportunities to younger workers.

The experience demonstrated that developing and visibly engaging young talent can itself become an economic development strategy.

Dr. Charlotte Rich, Eastern Kentucky University

Dr. Rich described ECU's approach to embedding career preparation and experiential learning within the English major. Students receive preparation in resumes, cover letters, interviewing, networking and career exploration and then participate in a five-week job-shadowing experience.

The experience is incorporated into the academic course rather than requiring students to add an unpaid extracurricular commitment to already demanding schedules. This approach is particularly important for students who are already working while attending college.

Students reflect on the skills developed through their placements and connect those experiences to Kentucky's **10 Essential Skills**. Dr. Rich also discussed leveraging alumni networks to help students understand the variety of careers available to graduates, particularly in disciplines where career pathways may be less obvious.

The model was highlighted as a potentially scalable approach because it largely leverages existing campus and alumni relationships rather than requiring substantial new resources.

Tami Hatfield, GE Appliances

Hatfield discussed the employer perspective and the importance of collaboration among businesses, schools and workforce partners. She emphasized that employers increasingly recognize that developing Kentucky's talent pipeline is a shared responsibility rather than simply a competition among companies for workers.

GE Appliances has worked to develop models and resources that other employers can use, including approaches for teacher externships, student tours and other work-based learning experiences. The discussion highlighted the importance of making it easier for businesses—particularly those without extensive workforce-development infrastructure—to participate.

Access to Experiential Learning

Members discussed barriers that can prevent students from participating in experiential learning, particularly students who already work significant hours while enrolled.

The group discussed the need to think broadly about what qualifies as experiential learning and how existing employment can potentially be connected to academic and career outcomes. Paid experiences, embedded course experiences and flexible models were identified as important strategies for expanding participation.

Dr. Thompson expressed a long-term aspiration for **100% of students to participate in an experiential learning opportunity during high school or college**, including options such as undergraduate research, with a goal of a substantial portion of those experiences being paid.

Essential Skills Alignment

Due to time constraints, the planned presentation on stakeholder feedback related to essential skills alignment was postponed.

Travis Muncie provided a brief preview of feedback gathered through focus groups involving the Kentucky United We Learn Council and the Early Childhood Regional Collaborative Network.

Initial feedback indicates that significant work related to essential or durable skills is occurring within individual sectors. The next opportunity is to strengthen alignment across **early childhood, K-12, postsecondary education and the workforce** so learners experience a more coherent progression of skill development.

A more detailed review of stakeholder feedback will be presented at the next CEC meeting.

Key Themes and Follow-Up

The meeting identified several areas for continued CEC discussion:

- Develop a clearer understanding of Kentucky's disconnected youth population, including who they are, pathways into disconnection, outcomes and gaps in available data.
- Continue exploring strategies to reconnect adults with some college but no credential to postsecondary education and workforce pathways.
- Consider AI through both a skills-development and leadership/investment lens.
- Expand access to high-quality work-based and experiential learning across K-12 and postsecondary education.
- Explore approaches that make experiential learning accessible to students who are already employed or face financial and time constraints.
- Strengthen employer, education and workforce partnerships and identify scalable models that can be replicated across Kentucky.
- Continue aligning essential and durable skills across early childhood, K-12, postsecondary education and the workforce.
- Review stakeholder feedback on essential skills alignment at the next meeting.

Next Meeting

The Commonwealth Education Continuum will meet **in person on November 18, 2026**. The meeting will revisit workforce and experiential learning discussions and include a more detailed review of stakeholder feedback regarding alignment of essential skills across Kentucky's education and workforce continuum.

Dr. Thompson thanked the presenters, panelists and members for their participation and emphasized that the discussion will inform continued work to expand experiential learning and strengthen alignment between education and Kentucky's future workforce.

