

A Case Study in Scaling Innovation: Bullitt County Public Schools and Authentic Learning

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Bullitt County Public Schools (BCPS) set out to make instruction and assessment across the district more relevant to community-identified competencies, but high turnover and a large novice workforce forced the district to scale back its ambitions. This case study traces how BCPS deliberately narrowed its definition of success, trading breadth of ambition for a pace its teaching corps could actually sustain.

Background & Bold Idea

Bullitt County Public Schools is a mid-sized district outside of Louisville, Kentucky. The district has 25 schools serving 12,846 students. Half of BCPS students are from economically disadvantaged households, 15% are students of color, and 8% are identified as English Learners.

BCPS sought to implement competency-based assessments and authentic learning experiences that connect to the district's Graduate Profile competencies. This is a districtwide effort, aiming to change instruction and assessment for every teacher in every school, while intentionally allowing school leaders to determine the depth of implementation.

Case Summary

In 2016, BCPS began to hear growing concerns that graduation requirements were failing to challenge students and reinforcing low expectations. In response, BCPS launched a Graduate Profile (comparable to a Portrait of a Graduate) process with the entire school community to identify the core competencies every student should master. That work pointed the district toward **“authentic learning”: instruction and assessment in relevant content and tasks that connect to students’ lives inside and outside of school, build student agency, and have a real impact on the community.** Implementing authentic learning requires teachers to move from traditional teaching approaches through transitional practices toward what BCPS calls transformational teaching.

As of June 2026, the Graduate Profile is fully in place. Authentic learning has taken root in some schools, but it is still emerging in others. Every school now sets Transformational Learning Goals, school-level targets that define how many and what kinds of authentic learning experiences students will have each year. However, the degree of ambition varies widely. Some schools limit themselves to one or two authentic learning experiences per student per year, while others are implementing interdisciplinary projects and defenses of learning. These are culminating presentations where students demonstrate mastery of standards and competencies before a panel of teachers and community members. The district is currently building the structures needed to bring defenses of learning to every school.

What BCPS has achieved required substantial effort and resources to overcome the challenges the district faced. Authentic learning represents a significant departure from how most teachers were trained to teach. At the outset, the district had limited instructional infrastructure to support this kind of work, and even the project leads—the Deputy Superintendent and CAO—needed time to develop a clear, shared understanding of what authentic learning should look like in BCPS classrooms. At the same time, the district faced persistently high teacher turnover, a large share of novice and emergency-certified educators, and a shifting state policy landscape, including a new High-Quality Instructional Resource (HQIR) mandate that required schools to adopt a new core curriculum. In other words, BCPS was building the vision, the infrastructure, and the capacity to scale, all at once.

Against that backdrop, the district made meaningful and deliberate progress. The central office was reorganized to keep the instructional vision coherent and protected. A multi-year cohort structure gave teachers a pathway into the work. The district worked with instructional coaches to develop them into genuine champions of authentic learning. Professional learning evolved in response to direct feedback from teachers and union leadership. The project lead team continuously refined its definition of authentic learning, tightening expectations, developing shared frameworks, and building new data systems, as they learned what the district could realistically build and sustain. The district worked with external partners to develop customized AI tools to provide critical design support and help reduce the amount of work teachers need to put into designing and implementing authentic learning experiences.

Even so, scaling efforts have struggled to reach depth. Lowering barriers to entry helped spread the work broadly, but also set a relatively low ceiling for how much instructional practice actually changed. Voluntary participation in a high-autonomy system meant adoption remained uneven. Further, the gap between the district's vision for authentic learning and the current capacity of its teaching force remains wide. Moving from spread to depth and from early adopters to consistent practice across schools will require significant work.

This case study draws on 54 interviews with central office leaders, principals, teachers, and external coaches (conducted between June 2023 and June 2026), six site observations, and implementation data supplied by BCPS and external coaches.

How did Authentic Learning evolve from 2019 to 2026?

2018-19

In May 2019, the BCPS Board of Education officially adopted the Graduate Profile, establishing six core competencies for all students: effective communicator, innovative problem-solver, productive collaborator, self-directed navigator, community contributor, and mastery learner.

2019-22

BCPS launched its Graduate Profile Cohort, a voluntary group of individual teachers focused on unpacking and implementing the new competencies to lay the initial groundwork for authentic learning. In 2022, BCPS was selected for the statewide PBLWorks contract, which provided intensive training and consulting to grow “pockets” of project-based learning across the state. The district also restructured its central office, consolidating Academics, HR, and Technology under the direct supervision of the Deputy Superintendent. As part of this restructuring, BCPS eliminated the District Assessment Coordinator role, overhauled the Chief Academic Officer (CAO) position to lead a combined curriculum and assessment team, and converted a school-based coaching position into a districtwide K-12 instructional coach role.

2022-23

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2023-24

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BCPS was selected to participate in Phase I of this study. Building on the Graduate Profile Cohort, the district worked with an external TA provider to create a sequential, tiered cohort structure that moves teachers through a defined progression of capacity-building while also shifting professional learning from individual educators to school-based teams (principals, coaches, and teachers) over the course of three cohorts.

Early professional learning for the initiative relied on stipended after-school cohorts, but union leadership warned that a voluntary model would only reach the most motivated teachers. BCPS responded by building Authentic Learning into the regular workday: it offered professional learning sessions during contracted hours, devoted more of its limited negotiated training days (“Bullitt Days”) to the work, and made Authentic Learning a core part of Thrive Academy, its onboarding program for new teachers. But beginning in fall 2023, all Kentucky school districts were required to adopt an HQIR for Reading/ELA. To make sure HQIR and Authentic Learning could coexist, the district allowed some schools to fully implement HQIR before turning their attention to Authentic Learning.

2024-25

BCPS moved on to the second, two-year scaling phase of our study. Weather events cost the district more than five instructional days, including key professional development days planned for the initiative. But despite this disruption, BCPS continued its cohorts, while also piloting its first AI-powered digital tools (see sidebar for more description of the AI tools).

The district observed wide variation in the quality and rigor of Authentic Learning experiences (ALEs) across schools. To rectify this, they moved from a broad, loosely defined concept of project-based learning to a specific BCPS Instructional Vision and Authentic Learning Experience Design Framework. This shift included two key elements:

1. Standardized instructional “look-fors” that define what transformational teaching looks like in practice;
2. Early iterations of custom AI tools built specifically around the district’s framework to help ensure new lesson designs met BCPS’s definition of authenticity and standards alignment.

How does BCPS use AI tools to support authentic learning?

BCPS uses several AI-enabled tools to help in the authentic learning cycle. The two most-used tools are:

- Inkwire: the district's central platform for authentic learning experiences (i.e., performance assessments). It is where teachers build performance assessments and where students document, curate, and defend evidence of their growth toward Graduate Profile competencies.
- AL-E: A custom-made coach for teachers. It helps them make "simple shifts" by adapting their HQIR curriculum into community-connected learning experiences.

BCPS is also piloting other custom AI tools, including a coach designed to help teachers build confidence and take instructional risks. Together, the tools are meant to reduce teachers' design workload while keeping lessons aligned to the district's definition of authentic learning.

2025-26

BCPS retooled its principal evaluations to measure school progress toward the district's transformational learning goals. The district also launched a Transformational Walkthrough Tool to evaluate teachers' implementation of transformational teaching practices, along with new supporting data systems and dashboards. Principals were given flexibility to define what Authentic Learning looks like at their schools—a flexibility that, in some cases, tipped toward quantity over quality. AI tools AL-E and InkWire become available to all teachers districtwide.

In June 2026, the Kentucky Department of Education began implementing Framework 4.0, an updated assessment and accountability model that gives school districts more local flexibility while meeting federal requirements. Some of the local accountability components in Framework 4.0 were influenced by BCPS's work in Community-Based Accountability.

Authentic Learning: In-Depth Assessment of Scaling Progress

To assess BCPS's progress in scaling Authentic Learning, we examined the same four dimensions of scale referenced in the main report (see the Appendix in the [main report](#) for more details): spread, depth, sustainability, and shift in ownership.

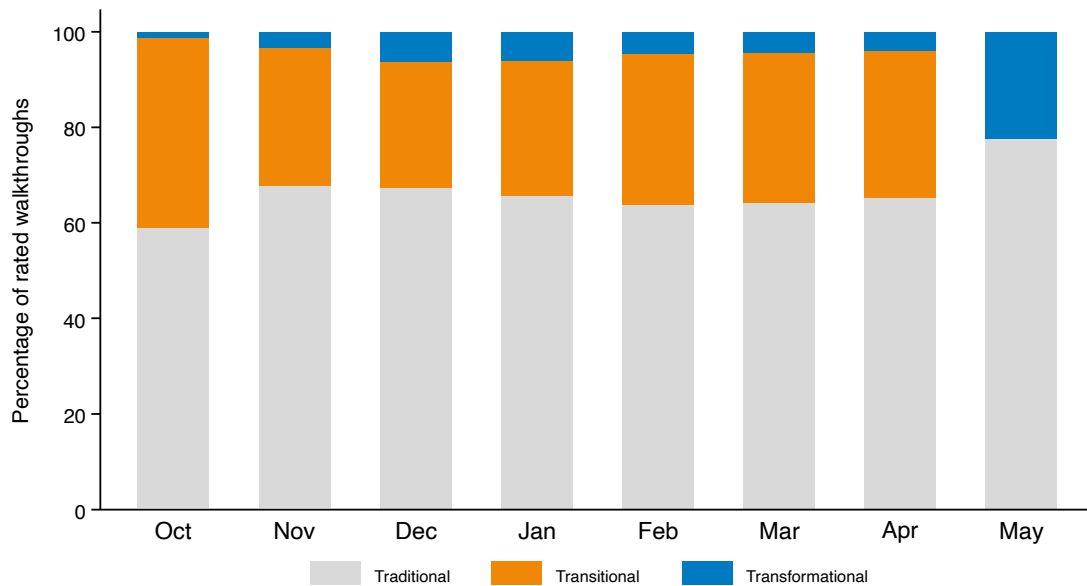
Spread: Medium. BCPS has spread key elements of the Bold Idea across every school in the district—the Graduate Profile and its competencies are now recognized districtwide, and all schools are engaged in some form of authentic learning. But that breadth masks real unevenness: the actual implementation of authentic learning experiences varies considerably from school to school.

- Approximately 2,200 students (about 17% of the district's total enrollment) across 8 out of 25 schools participated in Defenses of Learning or student-led presentation experiences.
- During the last two years, 620 teachers (about 65% of all teachers in the district) created 2,576 performance assessments in Inkwire (see sidebar).

Depth: Medium-Low. A small number of schools have integrated authentic learning into core instruction and assessment across multiple teachers. Still, at most schools, only a handful of early-adopter teachers implement multiple authentic learning experiences in their classrooms. These early adopter teachers do report positive changes in student learning experiences. According to one math teacher, "What my kids are doing on these [authentic learning experiences] is far above what I'm testing them on. The math that they're coming up with and what they're doing is really above the level that I'm testing them at, which to me is great. ... I taught for 17 years [and] I 100% did not want to change. I'm glad I did. It's made a huge difference in how my classroom is."

However, by and large, authentic learning remains at the awareness stage rather than reshaping daily classroom practice. Based on the district's Transformational Walkthrough Tool (completed by the CAO, principals, and instructional coaches), instruction remains overwhelmingly traditional with few examples of rigorous, transformational practice. See Figure 1 for a monthly districtwide distribution of teacher ratings.

Figure 1: Overall Transformational Learning Rating by Month, SY25-26

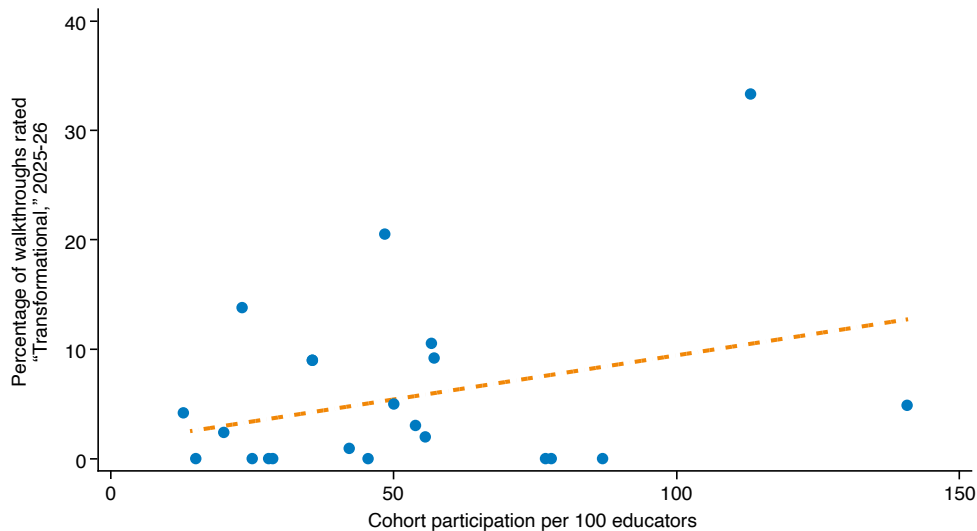


Rated walkthroughs per month: October: 95; November: 330; December: 166; January: 169; February: 287; March: 218; April: 52; May: 9.

Each walkthrough is weighted equally. Excludes walkthroughs with no overall rating and months with fewer than 5 ratings.

There is some emerging evidence that participating in professional learning is associated with implementing more transformational practices in the classroom. Over the past two years, approximately 70 teachers, as well as 150 leaders and instructional coaches, participated in professional learning cohorts. Comparing cohort participation and the percentage of teacher walkthroughs rated as “transformational” across 21 schools shows a positive but modest correlation ($r=0.31$, see Figure 2), suggesting that the district’s professional learning is associated with the desired changes in instructional and assessment practices.

Figure 2: Relationship between cohort prevalence and transformational practice, by school



Note: Based on data from 21 schools. The cohort participation measure is a cumulative measure over two years, and educators can participate in multiple cohorts. Therefore, the measure can exceed 100 per 100 educators. Educator denominators use all certified staff, not just teachers.

Ownership: Medium. The project leads—the Deputy Superintendent and CAO—still carry the lion’s share of responsibility for the initiative, but ownership is expanding. The Superintendent works with the school board to maintain consistent support for the work, even through school board turnover. Responsibility for ensuring principals and teachers are adopting authentic learning is increasingly distributed among other roles and a districtwide instructional coaching structure. For example, in addition to the Deputy Superintendent, the Director of Elementary Education and the Director of Secondary Education meet with principals every two weeks to provide one-on-one coaching on their transformational vision and instructional leadership. Ownership also extends to the school level. Embedding authentic learning targets in principal and instructional coach evaluations has raised investment across both roles, particularly among instructional coaches.

Sustainability: Medium-Low. Reaching this level of spread has depended heavily on multi-year partnerships with external technical assistance providers (TAs), both to operationalize the Graduate Profile competencies for use in instruction and assessment, creating the structures for performance-based assessments, and to provide coaching. At the same time, BCPS has made real strides toward building internal capacity. District leaders, instructional coaches, several principals, and cohort teachers have deepened their expertise in competency-based education and performance-based assessment, and increasingly lead professional development themselves. The district is also hoping that AI-enabled tools (AL-E, InkWire) will further build internal capacity. The open question is whether this expertise is sufficient to drive change, given persistently high turnover and a large share of novice and emergency-certified educators.

What Helped and Hindered Piloting and Scaling Authentic Learning

What Helped

- ***A strong foundation and shared vision.*** The community-rooted Graduate Profile gave the district a consistent foundation and shared vision that held steady across years of implementation. Stakeholders, including parents and business owners, were involved from the start to ensure a shared vision.
- ***District leadership coherence.*** Consistent central office leadership, paired with a strategic reorganization, helped keep the instructional vision a stable priority that did not shift despite turnover or competing initiatives.
- ***Investment in capacity-building.*** Cohorts led by an external coach with deep expertise, a districtwide instructional coaching structure, and embedded professional learning (including the use of Bullitt Days) created pathways for teacher engagement and gradual expansion of the Bold Idea.
- ***Effective use of instructional coaches.*** Every school has a district-supervised instructional coach who helps principals facilitate the instructional vision. These coaches served as a key bridge between district strategy and classroom practice, helping to support implementation on the ground and build teacher buy-in and capacity.
- ***Project leads who continuously seek and respond to data and feedback.*** The Deputy Superintendent and CAO sought guidance from external experts through site visits and ongoing collaboration with an external coach. They also continually gathered formal and informal feedback from teachers and principals through surveys, school visits, and direct conversations. With support from an external provider, the team also built new data systems to track key aspects of the Bold Idea, giving them a clearer basis for deciding where to adjust supports and resources.

What Hindered

- ***Reliance on optional participation.*** Voluntary participation within a high-autonomy system limited how consistently the work was adopted across schools—a natural ceiling for how far a diffusion-based approach can reach on its own.
- ***The strong pull of the status quo.*** Teacher training in traditional approaches, ongoing accountability pressures, and the new HQIR requirements all reinforced existing instructional approaches and slowed deeper implementation of authentic learning. In particular, the state's accountability system, based largely on state standardized test performance, made educators wary that authentic learning might cause test scores to drop, lowering the school's accountability rating.
- ***Capacity challenges.*** Teacher turnover and uneven levels of experience made it difficult to build the expertise needed for deeper instructional shifts across all

schools. The district had to recalibrate its approach toward more foundational supports rather than the more ambitious shifts it initially envisioned. One instructional coach observed, “I think our biggest challenge as a school is having so many teachers that are brand new or are in teaching programs while they’re teaching, so they don’t have the fundamental knowledge of planning and tying things to a standard ... Well, if I’m learning my standards and learning classroom management and learning engagement strategies and learning all at the same time, it gets really difficult to try to implement it all.”

- **Unclear sustainability.** While the district has retooled positions to sustain the work, there are ongoing questions about the continued effectiveness of tools like AL-E and Inkwire once grant funding for external consulting ends. Some staff noted that the increasing focus on documentation and “logging” the work made the initiative feel more bureaucratic, which threatened to dampen teacher passion.

About the Center on Reinventing Public Education

The Center on Reinventing Public Education (CRPE) is a research organization at Arizona State University's Mary Lou Fulton College for Teaching and Learning Innovation, where transformative ideas are rigorously examined and tested, and research informs action. Since 1993, we have remained independent of any single ideology while holding firmly to our core belief that public education is a goal—to prepare every child for citizenship, economic independence, and personal fulfillment—and not a particular set of institutions. From that foundation, we study what it will take for public education to meet every student's needs and use those insights to inform meaningful changes in policy and practice. Learn more about our work at crpe.org.

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