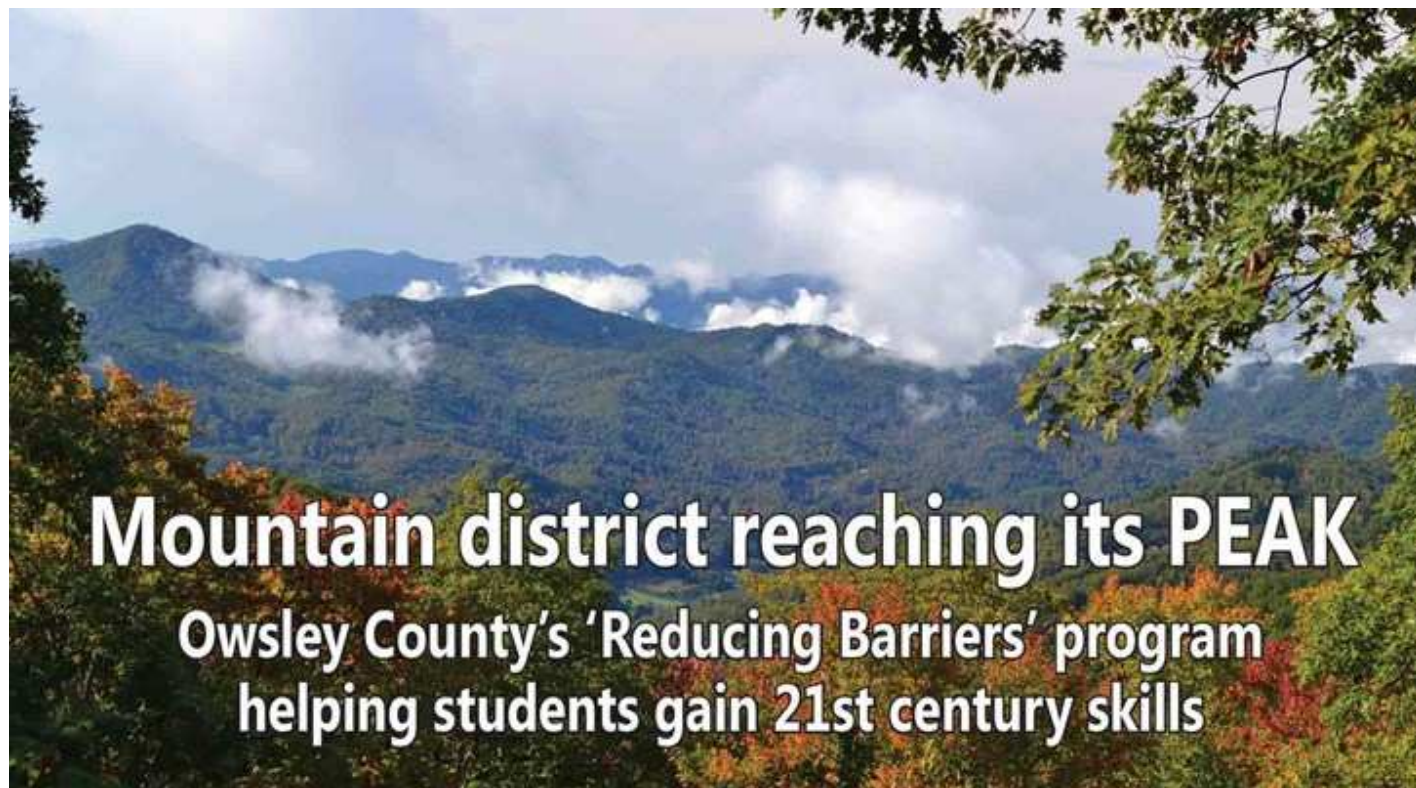


## PEAK Award



*Kentucky School Advocate*

May 2016

By Matt McCarty

Staff writer



Students in the Owsley County school district face many challenges. They are isolated because of a lack of major roadways. The county is among the poorest in the country and has a rapidly declining population. County residents have a low education attainment level.

But when it comes to preparing students for college, career and a 21st-century world, the southeastern Kentucky district is proving those barriers can be reduced and its students can be successful.

“The use of innovation and technology in the Owsley County School District has given our students a window into a world that may have never been seen,” Jennifer Hall, science teacher at Owsley County High School, wrote in the PEAK nomination. “Forward thinking administration and staff work continuously to ensure that all students have been given all the tools needed to ensure they have the highest quality of education.”

The success of the district’s “Reducing Barriers in a Rural Kentucky High School” initiative has earned it KSBA’s Public Education Achieves in Kentucky (PEAK) Award. The PEAK Award, given twice yearly, was established in 1997 to focus statewide attention on outstanding public school efforts that enhance student learning skills and promote the positive impact of public elementary and secondary education in Kentucky.

“I was impressed by the ‘no quit’ attitude of Owsley County in their ‘Reducing Barriers’ effort,” wrote PEAK judge Karen Byrd, a member of KSBA’s board of directors. “They recognized their challenges and faced them head on because they care about their students.”

Bailee McIntosh, a kindergarten student at Owsley County, works on an assignment at home during a snow day. “This was a comprehensive response in a very proactive way to a regional problem,” added KSBA staff member Jon Nipple, who also served as a judge. “I really like the fact that they recognize their situation and rather than whining, took steps to change!”

### **The barriers**

Besides its isolation and poverty (89 percent of district students qualify for free or reduced-price meals), Owsley County is losing population at the fifth-highest rate in Kentucky, which has resulted in the district’s enrollment declining by 54 students over the last five years.

“You do the math on that, \$4,000 a kid, that’s \$200,000 less, and if you go back five years that’s a million dollars I’ve lost in five years,” Owsley Superintendent Tim Bobrowski said. “... We have to watch every dime that comes in here from our general fund but we do rely heavily on our state and federal grants.”

Additionally, the education level in the district is a concern. Data shows that 41 percent of residents have less than a high school diploma and only 4.4 percent hold a graduate or professional degree.

“The kids can’t help that their parents didn’t choose to go to college, but I feel like it’s our job to get them ready for whatever choice they make, whether it be the college track or the career track, or both,” Bobrowski said.

In the face of these factors, the district asked, "How can we meet the needs of our high school students when we are faced with so many barriers?"

"Having the necessary 21st-century skills will ensure success after they graduate and either enter the workforce or move on to postsecondary education," Hall said. "The decision to use technology as a bridge has proved to be beneficial to the students in our district."

That technology includes the use of blended learning, 24/7 access to instruction and much more (see initiatives at bottom of page).

### **The results**

In 2011, just 7 percent of Owsley County students graduated college/career ready. In 2015, 79.9 percent of graduates were college/career ready.

The district's high school graduates received \$662,956 in scholarship money in 2014 and \$362,250 in 2015. Twenty-five percent of the high school's 10th-12th graders are enrolled in college course work through the district's partnership with Eastern Kentucky University, Morehead State University and the Hazard Community and Technical College.

The district has been designated as a District of Innovation and a Digital Promise School.

Olivia Bryant graduated from Owsley County High School in 2014. Two weeks earlier she graduated from Hazard Community and Technical College with an associate of arts degree. She graduated with a 3.9 GPA on her college coursework and is currently a senior at Eastern Kentucky University.

Her mom, Jennifer Bryant, wrote that the enrollment loss worried her because a corresponding decrease in teaching staff and courses offered could have limited her daughter's options.

"My daughter is very artistic and enjoys studying the humanities," Bryant said. "I was very happy to learn in my daughter's sophomore year that the school district had adopted new initiatives to allow students access to more dual-credit classes. This allowed her to take classes that fed her passion for the arts. She took humanities, world religions, art history, music appreciation and philosophy. She also took classes to help her meet all her general education requirements for college."

Jennifer's son, Axl, is a senior at OCHS and has taken several dual credit science classes.

"These classes have challenged him academically and allowed him to be exposed to content that he would have not been otherwise," she said.

The Owsley County Board of Education allocates \$1,800 pay for its teachers to teach a dual credit course. Students may pay a \$50 fee for some dual-credit courses but the board has allocated up to \$10,000 to help offset those costs.

“Our board is a very student-centered, focused board and we’re always looking out for the needs of the students as well as what else can we do for our students and it’s really good to have a board that thinks that way but then also acts that way,” Bobrowski said.

**The district’s reducing barriers initiative includes:**

- Blended learning, which enables students to combine classroom learning with working independently via technology.
- Non-traditional instructional days, so students can continue to learn while at home during inclement weather.
- Pathways to Careers for freshmen and sophomores. Students in those grade levels do job shadowing and have a mentor in career exploration.
- 24/7/365 learning management systems, including Edgenuity and Blackboard, which enable students to get instruction at school, home or wherever they may be. Virtual high school addresses home-bound, excessive absences and individual learning needs or issues.
- Early College options and dual credit classes (10-12) earn college credit. The district currently offers 33 credit courses.
- One-to-one access at high school and Wi-Fi on buses.
- Individual learning plans for all grades 9-12 students, graduation waivers. Once students reach benchmark levels in math and reading their instructional time is flexible to allow for career exploration and additional college courses.