

But What About Staffing?

Comparing Fayette County Public Schools' staffing trends to enrollment and academic performance

Richard G. Innes

Summary

Fayette County Public Schools has a \$16 million budget shortfall that it must address quickly. Staffing levels are one area of management that raises critical questions.

Unlike the statewide trend of declining Average Daily Attendance (ADA), Fayette County Public Schools (FCPS) maintained stable or rising ADA until the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, after which FCPS' ADA also declined.

Despite this recent drop in student attendance, FCPS has steadily increased staffing. Certified Staff (those requiring a teaching certificate) grew by a shocking 18% and Classified Staff by 12% from 2010-11 to 2023-24.

However, academic performance has faltered: the district's average ACT composite score in 2023-24 for 11th graders – the only consistently used state-administered test since 2010-11 – fell to 18.9, down sharply from 20.1 in 2010-11.

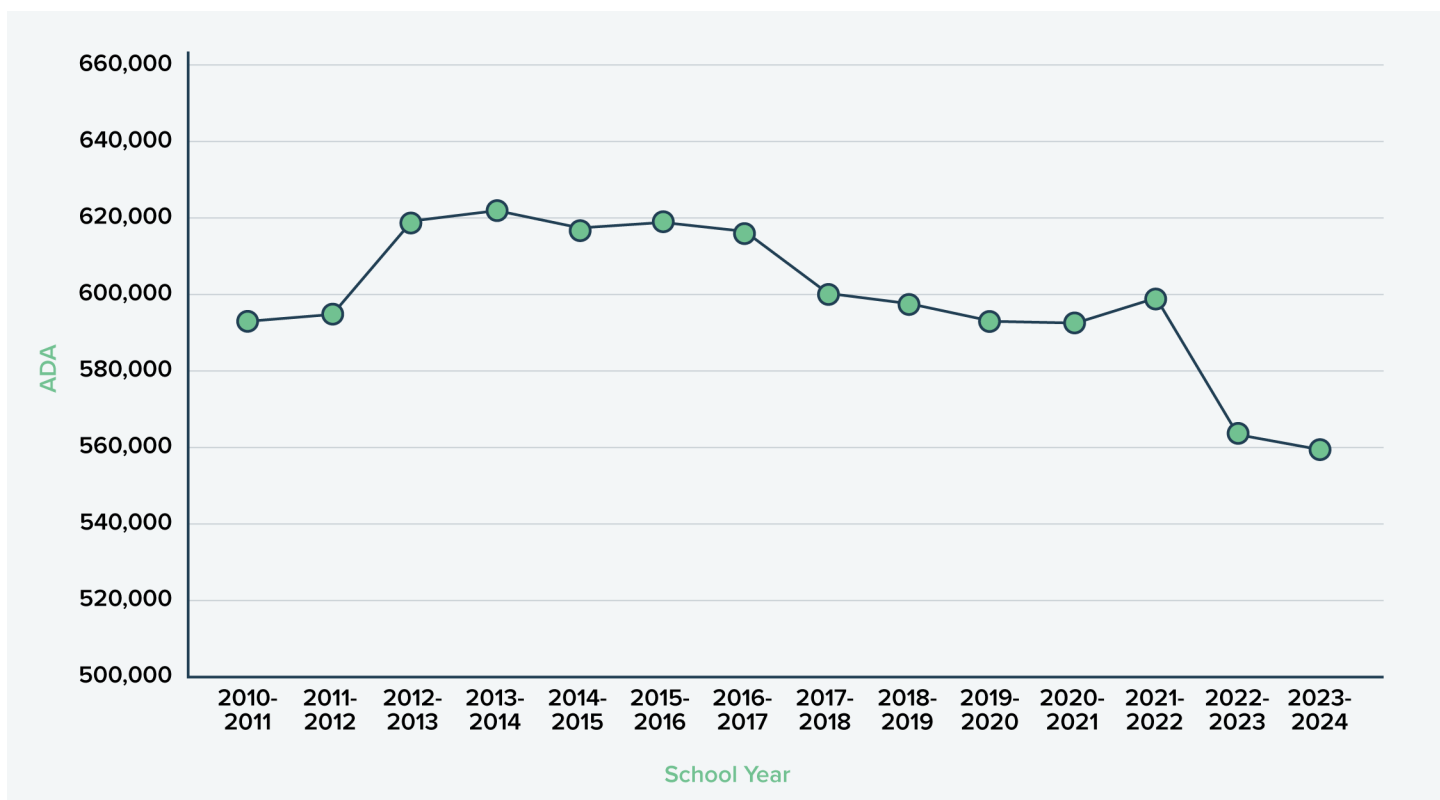
These trends raise critical questions:

- ▶ Is the FCPS board aware of the disparities in staffing, ADA, and academic performance?
- ▶ How do these issues affect the district's current fiscal challenges?
- ▶ What has the board done to address any of these issues, including the disconnects between the district's rising staffing and declining attendance and academic outcomes?

Average Daily Attendance is declining in Kentucky's schools

In May 2025 professors John Garen and Paul Coomes published Kentucky's statewide student Average Daily Attendance (ADA) numbers.¹ Figure 1, which is derived from their report, shows a downward trend in the statewide total ADA (60,000 fewer students) since the 2013-14 school term.

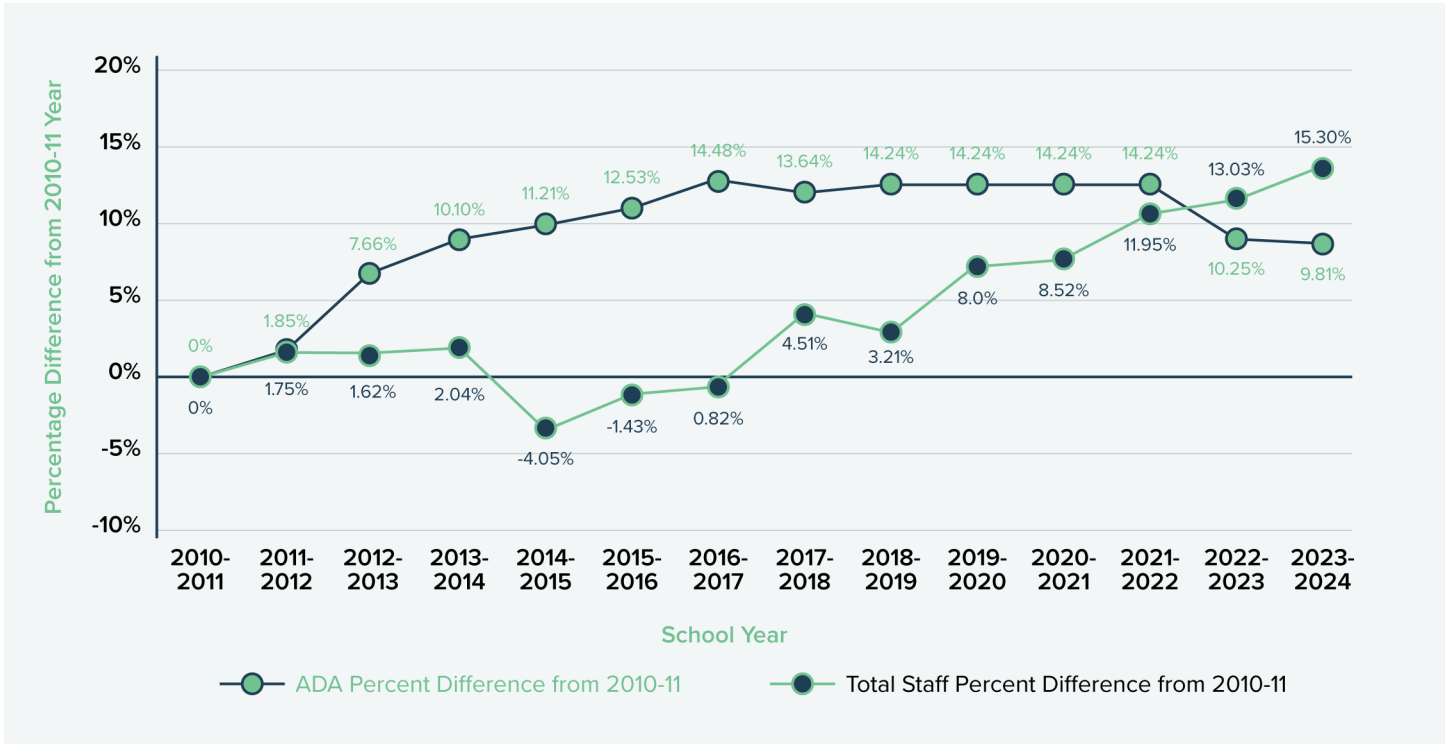
Figure 1: Average Daily Attendance in Kentucky Public School Districts²



Fayette County Public Schools' Trends

Figure 2 shows the trends in ADA and staffing in FCPS. The blue line with the light green dots in Figure 2 indicates the ADA in Fayette County's schools was growing or stable for a decade after 2010-11, the first year of staffing data available for this report. During this period, the Fayette County ADA trend moved in sharp contrast to the statewide ADA trend. However, trends have recently changed in the district. Since 2021-22 (and possibly a few years earlier), Fayette County's ADA has also been declining.

Figure 2: Comparing Average Daily Attendance and Total Staff in Fayette County Public Schools³



Note: ADA numbers were locked in 2019-2022 due to COVID. Source: KY Dept. of Ed. Spreadsheets

Nevertheless, FCPS staffing trends have not decreased to match the recent ADA changes. Figure 2 illustrates how the district’s total school staffing continues to increase in recent years despite student attendance declining. The percentage change in staffing since 2010-11 is larger than the change in the ADA from the same school year, raising questions about recent management policies in Kentucky’s second-largest public school system.

To better understand Figure 2, it’s helpful to refer to Table 1, which includes the data used to assemble Figure 2 and the other staffing-versus-ADA figure that follows.

First, Table 1 shows that in 2010-11, there was a total staff count (Classified and Certified Staff combined) in FCPS of 5,726. That count grew only slightly to 5,826 staffers in 2011-12, an increase of just 1.75% as shown in Figure 2.

In Kentucky’s public school system, Certified Staff hold positions requiring a teaching certificate. Classified Staff includes the other positions in the school system.

Between those same two years, the ADA in the district rose from 33,390 to 34,007 students, which was only a slightly larger increase of 1.85%. However, the student count in 2012-13 was notably higher than in 2010-11, rising to 35,947 – a 7.66% increase. In contrast, the total staff count in 2012-13 dropped slightly from the previous school term to 5,819 – only 1.62% higher than in 2010-11.

Table 1: Average Daily Attendance and Total Staff in Fayette County Public Schools⁴

Year	ADA	ADA Percent Difference from 2010-11	Certified Staff	Classified Staff	Total Staff Count	Certified Staff Percent Difference from 2010-11	Classified Staff Percent Difference from 2010-11	Total Staff Percent Difference from 2010-11
2010-11	33,390	0.00%	3,243	2,483	5,726	0.00%	0.00%	0.00%
2011-12	34,007	1.85%	3,294	2,532	5,826	1.57%	1.97%	1.75%
2012-13	35,947	7.66%	3,312	2,507	5,819	2.13%	0.97%	1.62%
2013-14	36,762	10.10%	3,324	2,519	5,843	2.50%	1.45%	2.04%
2014-15	37,133	11.21%	3,240	2,254	5,494	-0.09%	-9.22%	-4.05%
2015-16	37,575	12.53%	3,331	2,313	5,644	2.71%	-6.85%	-1.43%
2016-17	38,226	14.48%	3,338	2,341	5,679	2.93%	-5.72%	-0.82%
2017-18	37,946	13.64%	3,477	2,507	5,984	7.22%	0.97%	4.51%
2018-19	38,146	14.24%	3,431	2,479	5,910	5.80%	-0.16%	3.21%
2019-20	38,146	14.24%	3,584	2,600	6,184	10.51%	4.71%	8.00%
2020-21	38,146	14.24%	3,614	2,600	6,214	11.44%	4.71%	8.52%
2021-22	38,146	14.24%	3,753	2,657	6,410	15.73%	7.01%	11.95%
2022-23	36,811	10.25%	3,781	2,691	6,472	16.59%	8.38%	13.03%
2023-24	36,664	9.81%	3,832	2,770	6,602	18.16%	11.56%	15.30%

Note: ADA numbers were locked in 2019-2022 due to COVID. These numbers come from the Kentucky Department of Education.

Student growth exceeded staff growth in FCPS for several more years until the student count flattened after 2016-17 while the total staff count continued to grow after its low point in 2014-15.

Things changed during COVID

Something strange happened with the ADA after 2018-19 – the Kentucky Department of Education (KDE) reported flat ADA rates from 2019-20 to 2021-22 due to COVID. The department froze the ADA used for financial calculations in that period due to the difficulty in determining accurate attendance figures in virtual school settings. Thus, the ADA data in Figures 2 and 3 and Table 1 for these years are inaccurate.

After 2021-22, students returned to the classroom and ADA reporting returned to normal. For the first time since 2010-11, the rate of increase in FCPS staffing started to exceed the rate of change in ADA for the district. In fact, while staffing continued to increase, the district's ADA started to trend downward. By 2023-24, the district's staffing level was now 15.3% higher than it had been in 2010-11 even though the ADA had risen by only 9.8% during that time. If staff growth had only matched student growth, there would have been 314 fewer staffers in FCPS in 2024.

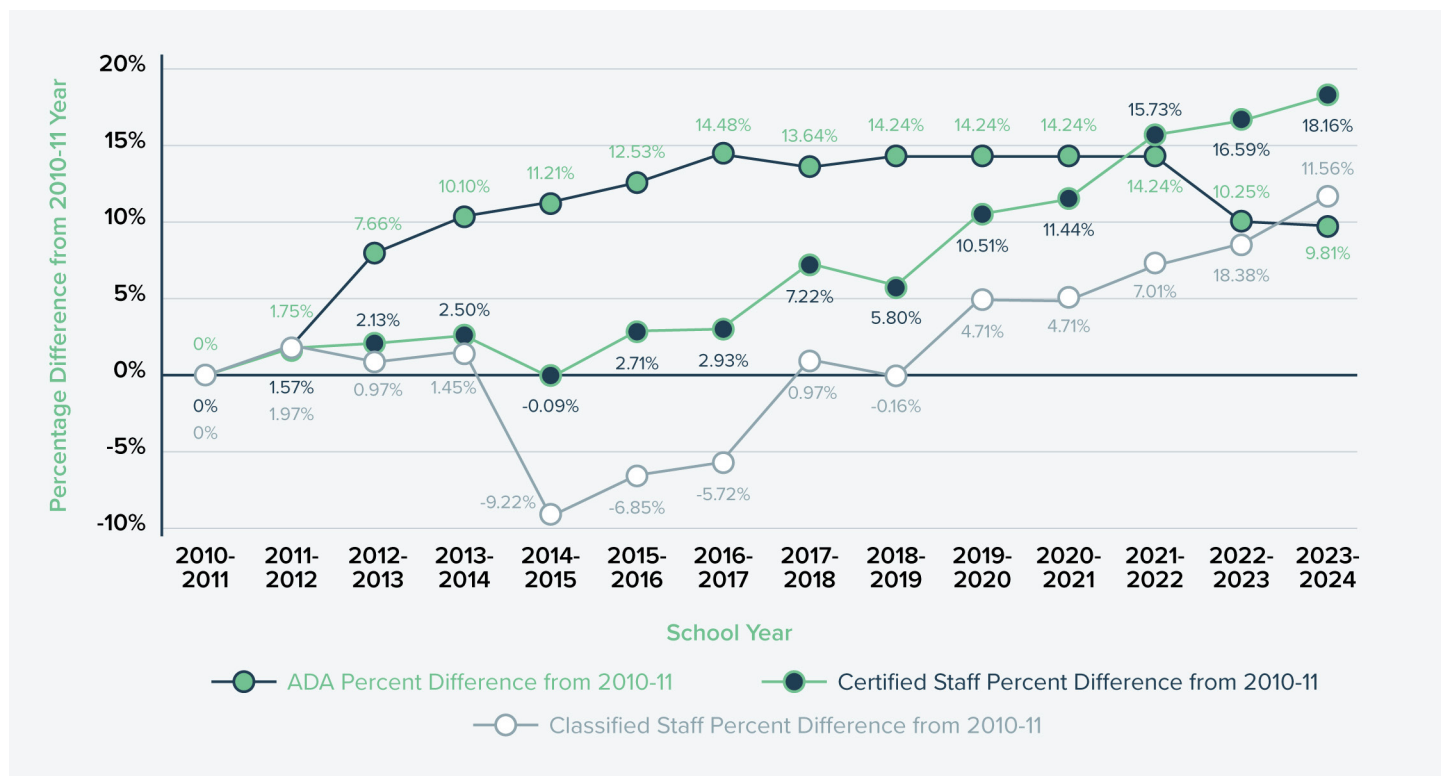
In fact, as of 2023-24, the growth in the total staff count in FCPS compared to the 2010-11 year is the highest shown in Figure 2. It's also higher than any growth percentage for ADA for any year shown in Figure 2.

The last two years of data in Figure 2 and Table 1 indicate that the ADA in FCPS declined. This decline likely started when the ADA numbers were frozen. Whether or not this attendance trend will continue remains to be seen, but the current situation raises concerns that FCPS may be overstaffed.

Trends vary by types of staff in FCPS

Certified and Classified Staff had differing trends, as shown in Figure 3.

Figure 3: Average Daily Attendance and Certified and Classified Staff Headcounts in Fayette County Public Schools⁵



Note: ADA numbers were locked in 2019-2022 due to COVID. These numbers come from the Kentucky Department of Education.

Except for 2014-15 with its 1-year dip, Certified Staff in FCPS (green line with dark blue dots) stayed fairly stable until 2016-17, after which a notable rise began and has generally continued to 2023-24, the most recent year of data available.

The rise in Certified Staff in FCPS surpassed the frozen ADA (ADA shown by dark blue line with light green dots) by around 2021-22, as well. In fact, this may have happened even earlier. Certified Staff continued to rise even after the freeze in ADA ended and ADA started a clear trend downward.

In sharp contrast, Classified Staff (light blue line with white dots) in the district hardly changed at all until after 2013-14. Then in 2014-15, there was a dramatic drop in Classified Staff in FCPS. Recovery just back to around the 2010-11 Classified Staff count didn't occur until 2017-18.

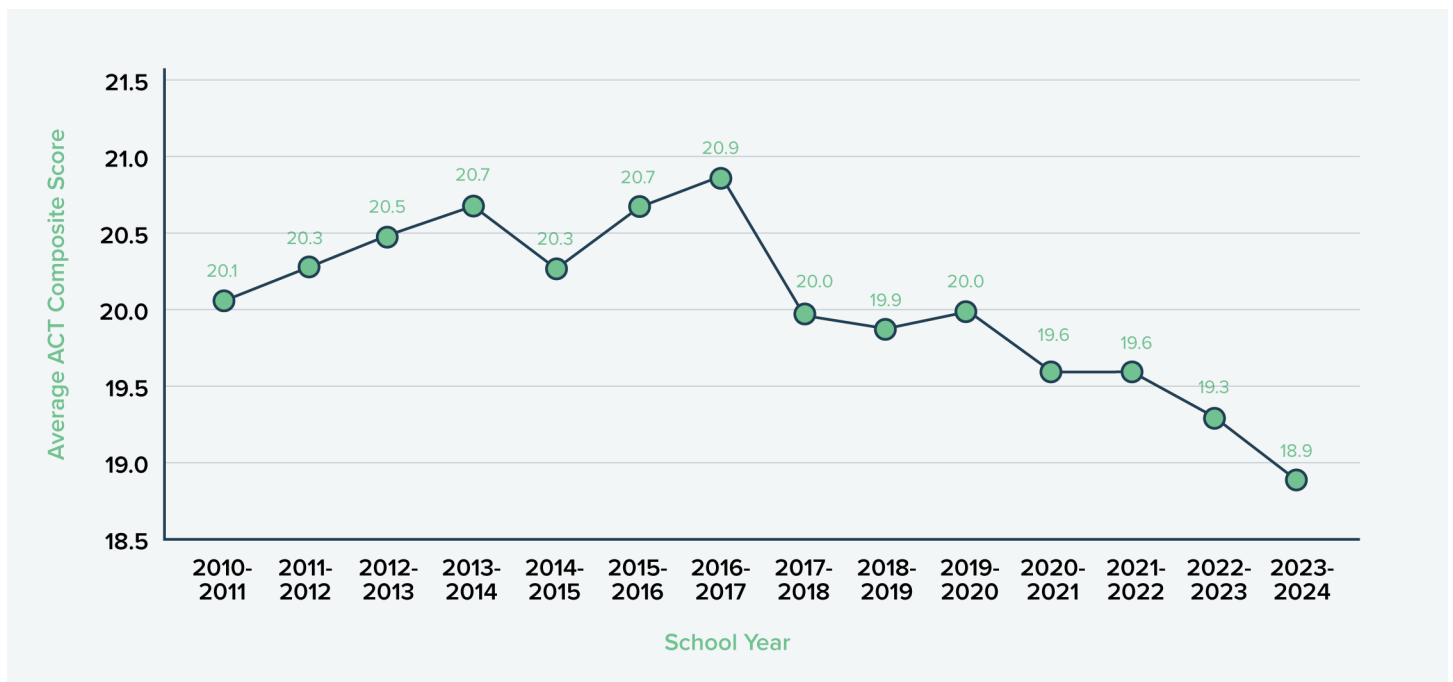
However, after 2018-19, the district's Classified Staff counts also continued to rise notably. By 2023-24, the rate of growth in Classified Staff also exceeded the ADA growth rate, though not by as much as the Certified Staff growth.

Several things seem evident from Figure 3: history reveals that when FCPS cut staffing, Classified Staff positions were the first to be reduced. However, most recently there has been growth in both Certified and Classified Staff in FCPS despite a decline in ADA.

Are rising staffing levels improving student performance?

Figure 4 shows the average ACT Composite Score rose until 2016-17. This was a time when Certified Staff growth was slow and stable and Classified Staff was declining. However, as staffing continued to rise after 2016-17, the ACT trend started a considerable decline. By 2023-24, the average ACT Composite Score was well below what FCPS posted in 2010-11. Exactly how this ACT trend might relate to the staffing increases warrants investigation by the FCPS board.

Figure 4: Fayette County Public Schools, ACT Composite Scores, Grade 11 Testing Only⁶



Performance trends for lower grades are not available over time. ACT, of course, cannot tell us what is happening in lower grades. Kentucky's own testing program is supposed to do that. But performance trends for lower grades are not available over time.

Unfortunately, Kentucky's public school assessment program has been quite unstable since 2010-11. The current Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA), which started in 2022, is different from the earlier Kentucky Performance Rating for Educational Progress (KPREP) test which, in turn, was different from the long-defunct CATS tests, which KPREP replaced in 2012. Even the KDE acknowledges that the KSA cannot be compared to the earlier KPREP.⁷

Only ACT has been stable throughout the period considered in this analysis. Unfortunately, the Kentucky Department of Education has ended use of the ACT by awarding a new contract to use the SAT instead starting with testing in the Spring of 2026. That will destroy the ACT trend line after the 2025 results release, making it harder for residents in Fayette County to monitor what is happening in their school system with decreasing enrollment but increasing staff.

In Closing

Staff costs are a major expense for school systems and the taxpayers who fund them. It is problematic to defend such costs with no evidence that academic performance is improving as a result.

Has the FCPS board considered the disconnect between the district's staffing and attendance and academic results? Has that board discussed these matters?

At present, as well-reported in the Lexington Herald-Leader and other major media, the FCPS is facing a funding crisis – including questions about funds not actually present – and even a related lawsuit. Although a detailed accounting for this situation has been slow in forthcoming, it seems likely that costs for staffing play a role, especially given the recent rises in staffing that don't seem to be justified by increases in enrollment. These staffing and performance issues need consideration and continued monitoring as the FCPS board develops a plan to deal with the situation.

Richard G. Innes is an education analyst with the [Bluegrass Institute](#).

Endnotes

1 Coomes, Paul, Ph.D., & Garen, John, Ph.D., Staffing Trends in Kentucky's Public Schools, Bluegrass Institute (May 2025). <https://www.bluegrassinstitute.org/staffing-trends-in-kentuckys-public-schools/>.

2 Coomes, Paul, Ph.D., & Garen, John, Ph.D., Staffing Trends in Kentucky's Public Schools, Bluegrass Institute (May 2025). <https://www.bluegrassinstitute.org/staffing-trends-in-kentuckys-public-schools/>. (Fig. 4).

3 Sources for data used to assemble Figure 2 are found in Table 1.

4 The ADA numbers in Table 1 come from the Kentucky Department of Education's annually released Revenues and Expenditures Reports and the earlier Receipts and Expenditures Reports. Reports for 2016-17 and earlier are available here: <https://www.education.ky.gov/districts/FinRept/Pages/Historical-Revenues-and-Expenditures.aspx>. More recent Annual Financial Revenues and Expenditures, District Level reports are available here: <https://www.education.ky.gov/districts/FinRept/Pages/Fund%20Balances,%20Revenues%20and%20Expenditures,%20Chart%20of%20Accounts,%20Indirect%20Cost%20Rates%20and%20Key%20Financial%20Indicators.aspx>. ADA percentage differences from 2010-11 are calculated by the author.

Certified Staff numbers come from: Kentucky Department of Education, Certified Staff Ethnic-Gender Count (2011-2025) (version 12/17/2024). <https://www.education.ky.gov/districts/FinRept/Pages/School%20District%20Personnel%20Information.aspx>.

Classified Staff numbers come from: Kentucky Department of Education, Classified Staff Ethnic-Gender Count (2011-2025) (version 12/17/2024). <https://www.education.ky.gov/districts/FinRept/Pages/School%20District%20Personnel%20Information.aspx>.

Total staff counts are computed by the author as a sum of the Certified and Classified numbers. Percentages in relation to 2010-11 are calculated by the author.

5 See Table 1 and endnote 4 for data sources.

6 Kentucky Department of Education, ACT Average Score (2023-2024). <https://www.education.ky.gov/Open-House/data/Pages/Supplemental-Data-Assessment-and-Accountability.aspx>

7 Clark, Jess, "New test scores show some improvement in Kentucky schools," Louisville Public Media, November 1, 2023, at: <https://www.lpm.org/news/2023-11-01/new-test-scores-show-some-improvement-in-kentucky-schools>.