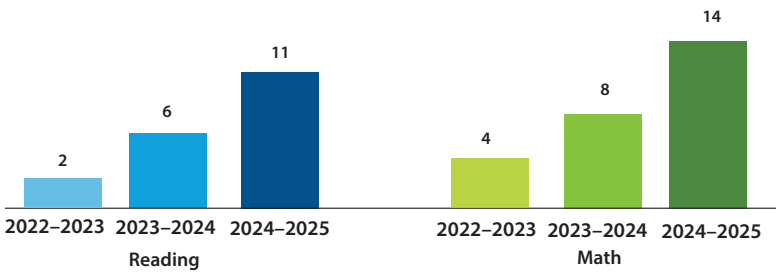
Building Capacity in Johnson County: How a Strong Coaching Culture Is Driving Results

Superintendent Thom Cochran and Johnson County educators are building a sustainable coaching culture grounded in results.

For Thom Cochran, education in Johnson County Schools extends far beyond a career; it's a continuation of his family's legacy. As the son of two former Johnson County educators, he's been a Golden Eagle since birth. That deep community investment shapes everything he does as superintendent, ensuring that every student has access to high-quality teaching. In his vision, excellence isn't negotiable; it's equitable—a vision shared by JCS teachers.

JCS was outperforming the state average, but for Cochran, a two-point lead in reading and a four-point lead in math weren't the ceiling—they were proof of what was possible with the right systems behind it.

JCS's Growing Scale Score Advantage over the State on the KSA



In 2022–2023, JCS students in Grades 3–8 outscored the Kentucky state average by two points in reading and four points in math on the Kentucky Summative Assessment (KSA). After one year of systematic coaching, that advantage tripled in reading and doubled in math. By 2024–2025, following two years of coaching, the district's advantage grew to 11 points in reading and 14 points in math, a combined 25-point lead over the state average.

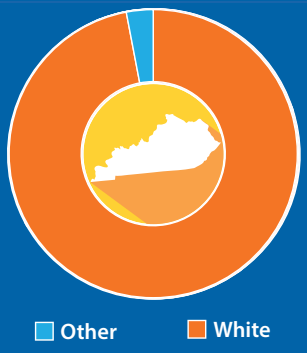
In 2024–2025, the superintendent turned that belief into structure. He made three deliberate choices: universal coaching in every K–12 building, so no teacher works without support; biweekly Digital Learning Coach coherence meetings, so coaching stays aligned across the district rather than fragmented building by building; and mentoring cycles for every teacher, not just those who were struggling.

The result? A growing advantage over the state average that tripled in reading and doubled in math in the first year, nearly doubling again in year 2 for both subjects (see the graph above).

Johnson County Schools (JCS)

Paintsville, Kentucky

3,292 Grades Pre-K–12 Students



63%
Students with Socioeconomic Disadvantages

25%
Students with Disabilities

"Leadership is about being visible in classrooms, asking questions, and authentically listening. I worked closely with our principals, our coaches, and our teachers to ensure they had the time, the tools, and the trust needed to make this work."

—Superintendent Thom Cochran

Partnership Built This

For 15 years, Johnson County's relationship with Curriculum Associates has been more than a vendor connection—it's been a shared mission. Beginning with the *i-Ready Inform*™ assessment through a school-level grant, this collaboration evolved into something deeper: a commitment to address individual student needs, remove barriers to implementation, and build expertise.

The district now also uses *i-Ready Personalized Instruction* to provide targeted online lessons that help students access Tier 1 instruction, the discourse-based *i-Ready Classroom Mathematics* as the core math curriculum to ensure consistent mathematical rigor, and *Magnetic Foundations*™ to provide explicit, systematic instruction across all early literacy domains.

When Johnson County decided to move to systematic coaching, Curriculum Associates didn't arrive as an outside expert. Instead, Professional Learning (PL) Specialist Alisha Hall supported district leaders in implementing their own coaching initiative. She attended learning walks with principals and instructional leaders, then debriefed on what they saw, including what feedback teachers needed and where coaching could help. She quickly became a valued member of the team.

> "[Alisha] is one of [us]. Truly a Golden Eagle." —JCS Principal

By providing pedagogical expertise and coaching protocols, Johnson County and Curriculum Associates experts together sparked the momentum to build internal capacity.

But the real impact was relational. Teachers saw coaching not as accountability but as partnership, and district leaders and coaches had a strategic partner who understood their vision and could help translate it into daily practice.

Rather than create dependency, this approach built systems and relationships JCS can sustain into the future.

Key Learnings for Other Districts

Circling back to the three deliberate choices he made in 2024, Superintendent Cochran shares these insights for districts considering a similar shift.

1. Long-Term Partnership Accelerates Internal Capacity

Invest in partners who know your people well enough to move fast. Johnson County's sustained relationship with Curriculum Associates is built on partnership, clarity, and commitment. When coaching launched, the PL specialist knew the district's priorities, curriculum, and people, enabling faster, more effective implementation.

2. Relationships Are the Foundation

Build coaching on relationships rather than protocols. A lasting coaching culture is built on trust, transparency, and genuine investment in people, not just on programs or systems. When teachers see coaches as thought partners, not evaluators, they engage authentically.

> "Investment in people is the future of the community." —Superintendent Cochran

3. All Teachers Need Mentors

Make mentoring universal so growth becomes the norm. Universal coaching signals that growth isn't remedial; it's continuous. By ensuring every teacher has access to coaching and mentoring cycles, districts remove stigma and normalize professional learning.

Johnson County's year 1 coaching culture shows that when districts start with trust, communicate clearly and transparently, and commit to building internal capacity, improvement follows. Coaching culture isn't done to teachers—it's built WITH them, grounded in data, aligned to curriculum, and designed to last.

The Education Scorecard—a collaboration among Harvard University's Center for Education Policy Research, Stanford University's Educational Opportunity Project, and Dartmouth researchers—recognized JCS as a **2026 "District on the Rise" in mathematics**.

Learn more here.

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