

2026–27 FREDRICKIA HARGROVE POSTER AND ESSAY CONTEST

DIVISION 6 — HIGH SCHOOL ARGUMENTATIVE ESSAY PROMPT (POLICY)

Theme: “Blueprint for Tomorrow: Constructing Your Character”

Anchor Passage: The architect’s blueprint, and “Learn, baby, learn, so that we can earn, baby, earn”

READING PASSAGE

Students will read the full transcript of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s speech “What Is Your Life’s Blueprint?”

As they read, students should pay special attention to Dr. King’s architectural metaphor — that “a building is not well erected without a good, sound, and solid blueprint” — to his three blueprint principles, to his claim that “doors of opportunity are opening to each of you that were not open to your mothers and your fathers,” and to his linking of learning directly to earning.

Students should also examine the **Emerson passage** closely. Dr. King quotes Emerson’s claim that the world beats a path to the door of whoever builds a better mousetrap and then adds a striking qualification of his own: “**This hadn’t always been true — but it will become increasingly true.**” In 1967, Dr. King predicted whether merit would be rewarded. Your generation is in a position now to evaluate it.

Official contest text: the full transcript, printed in this manual. Listening support and the full source note appear under “Official Contest Text and Listening Access.”

SCENARIO

In 1967, Dr. King emphasized that a building cannot be properly constructed without a solid blueprint. Today, Kentucky is creating one under circumstances he could never have foreseen.

The technology question is here, and Kentucky is already ahead of most states. Kentucky was among the first states in the nation to issue artificial intelligence guidance to all its public school districts, and **140 districts — 80% — now report having an intentional AI plan.** KDE’s guidance is built on keeping “humans in the loop.” The department has asked lawmakers for a baseline increase to the Kentucky Education Technology System plus **\$800,000** for a statewide network of professional learning and student demonstrations. Nationally, the pace is extraordinary: FutureEd is tracking **71 bills across 27 states** on AI in classroom instruction this session alone, and AI literacy will be assessed for the first time on the **2029 PISA** exam.

The opportunity question is also here, and it is not evenly distributed. Nationally, **57% of adults in households earning under \$30,000** have home broadband — compared with **95%** in households above \$100,000. Kentucky has invested heavily to close that gap, including a **\$386 million** high-speed internet expansion reaching more than 42,600 homes and businesses across 46 counties. But affordability remains a barrier: roughly **41%** of Kentuckians without home internet cite cost as the reason.

The presence question underlies both. Kentucky’s chronic absenteeism rose from **17.8% in 2018–19 to 29.8% in 2022–23** and has since improved to **25%**. The graduation rate stands at **93.5%**. Kentucky received

\$3.2 billion in federal pandemic relief for K–12 — about **\$4,700 per student**, above the national average of \$3,700 — and that funding has now expired.

Dr. King’s speech gives Kentucky a clear three-part test for any education policy:

- Does the policy protect student **dignity** and “somebodiness”?
- Does it prepare students for **excellence**?
- Does it advance **beauty, love, justice**, and equal opportunity?

Local history proves that opportunity must be built intentionally. Dr. Dennis H. Anderson founded the West Kentucky Industrial College in Paducah to educate Black students when other doors were closed. W.C. Young connected labor rights, education, dignity, and civic power. Curlee Brown Sr. sued Paducah Junior College in 1951, forcing it to integrate. Kentucky history shows the same struggle through the lives of Lyman T. Johnson and Georgia Davis Powers. National history situates it within the broader fight for civil rights, voting rights, and educational equity.

The King Center is asking the **Kentucky General Assembly’s Interim Joint Committee on Education** to help gather student policy proposals. This is a live audience: the Committee meets through the interim and cannot act on legislation until the **2027 regular session convenes on January 5, 2027** — approximately when your essay will reach them.

This raises a policy question: **How should Kentucky help students construct a future-ready life blueprint?**

VIEWPOINT 1: DIGITAL AND CAREER READINESS MUST LEAD

Supporters argue that Kentucky should prioritize AI literacy, computer science, career and technical education, dual credit, apprenticeships, and workforce skills. This connects directly to King’s call for excellence and to his own formula: *learn, baby, learn, so that we can earn, baby, earn*. Kentucky is already a national leader here, with 80% of districts holding an AI plan; supporters argue the state should press its advantage rather than hesitate.

Critics warn that this approach can become too focused on jobs and technology while ignoring character, dignity, and equity. Supporters respond that students cannot pursue excellence in the modern world without modern tools — and that a student without AI literacy in 2035 will be locked out of the very doors King promised were opening.

VIEWPOINT 2: CHARACTER AND CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY MUST LEAD

Supporters argue that schools should not chase every new technology trend without first asking what kind of people students are becoming. This connects to King’s “somebodiness” and his commitment to beauty, love, and justice. Students need digital ethics, media literacy, civic education, service learning, and real opportunities to practice responsibility. Supporters point out that King put dignity *first* in the blueprint and excellence second — and that KDE’s own answer to a 25% absenteeism rate was a campaign about belonging, not a new device.

Critics warn that character education without workforce preparation may leave students underprepared for economic realities. Supporters respond that innovation without character produces students who are technically skilled and morally unprepared — and that a machine that can write the essay makes the question “*who are you when no one is checking?*” more urgent, not less.

VIEWPOINT 3: AN EQUITY-BASED FUTURE BLUEPRINT

Supporters argue that Kentucky should combine future-ready skills with equity protections, civic learning, and character formation. A strong policy would include AI and digital literacy; career-connected learning; mentoring and advising; civic and ethical technology education; equity audits ensuring rural, low-income, Black, and other underserved students receive access; and student leadership and service opportunities.

This approach treats technology as a tool, excellence as a goal, dignity as the foundation, and justice as the measure. Supporters note the broadband gap — 57% versus 95% — and argue that an AI plan in 80% of districts means nothing to a student who cannot get online at home.

Critics argue that this approach is too expensive and too complicated, especially now that \$3.2 billion in federal relief has expired. Supporters respond that a partial blueprint produces partial results.

YOUR TASK

The Kentucky General Assembly’s Interim Joint Committee on Education is drawing up the state’s education blueprint for a generation facing AI, automation, and an uneven digital divide — and The King Center wants student policy proposals to inform it. Write a formal argumentative policy essay to them that answers one question:

How should Kentucky help students construct a future-ready life blueprint grounded in dignity, excellence, and justice?

Propose a specific, workable Kentucky policy grounded in one approach:

1. **Digital and career readiness** — Kentucky should prioritize technology, AI literacy, and workforce preparation.
2. **Character and civic responsibility** — Kentucky should prioritize digital ethics, identity, civic education, service, and democratic participation.
3. **Equity-based future blueprint** — Kentucky should combine future-ready skills, character formation, civic responsibility, and equal access to opportunity.

Your essay should go beyond merely naming a value; it must specify a policy.

For example:

“Kentucky should create a Future Blueprint Grant Program that requires participating districts to provide AI literacy, career-connected learning, digital ethics instruction, civic education, mentoring, and an annual equity audit showing which students have access to advanced coursework, technology, broadband, and career pathways.”

Be sure to:

- Open with a hook that grabs the reader’s attention before your claim.
- State a precise claim in the introduction — name the policy you are proposing.
- Support your claim with evidence from Dr. King’s speech transcript.
- **Use at least two statistics and interpret them** — do not simply quote a number.
- Connect your proposal to educational innovation, digital identity, AI, workforce change, civic education, or voting rights.
- Connect your proposal to equity, opportunity, or the NAACP mission.
- Include one local Paducah/McCracken County historical example.
- Include one Kentucky historical or policy example.
- Include one national civil-rights, education, voting-rights, or technology-equity example.
- Acknowledge and rebut counterclaims, including concerns about cost, staffing, technology overuse, local control, implementation, or political disagreement.
- Explain how the policy would be funded or why it deserves appropriation.
- Cite your sources.
- Organize your essay with an introduction, body paragraphs, counterclaim and rebuttal, and conclusion.
- Use a formal, policy-oriented tone appropriate for state lawmakers and The King Center.

Word Count: 750–1,000 words.

RESEARCH EXTENSION OPPORTUNITIES

The King Center Resources

- The King Philosophy — Nonviolence365®
- The King Center recording of “What Is Your Life’s Blueprint?”

Data and Current Context

- Kentucky School Report Card — kyschoolreportcard.com
- KDE, AI in Kentucky K–12 — education.ky.gov/districts/tech
- KDE Artificial Intelligence Guidance Brief
- Education Recovery Scorecard — Kentucky
- Pew Research Center — broadband adoption by income
- Kentucky Digital Equity Plan and state broadband investment

- FutureEd — 2026 state AI in education legislative tracker

Local History

- Dr. Dennis H. Anderson and West Kentucky Industrial College
- W.C. Young and Paducah labor and civil-rights history
- Curlee Brown Sr. and Paducah Junior College

Kentucky History and Policy

- Lyman T. Johnson and the University of Kentucky
- Georgia Davis Powers
- Kentucky career and technical education; dual credit
- Rural broadband access; school funding
- Kentucky Legislative Research Commission — legislature.ky.gov

National History

- *Brown v. Board of Education*
- Civil Rights Act of 1964; Voting Rights Act of 1965
- Thurgood Marshall and NAACP legal strategy
- AI literacy and digital equity

KSA ALIGNMENT FOR DIVISION 6

KSA Focus Area	What It Means	How to Show It
Clarity & Coherence	Write arguments supporting claims in an analysis of substantive topics using valid reasoning and sufficient evidence	“Kentucky should adopt ____ because...”
Support/Development	Establish relationships among claims, counterclaims, reasons, and evidence	Braid King, history, policy, technology, and equity
Counterclaims	Acknowledge and respond to opposing claims with logical reasoning and evidence	Address cost, staffing, feasibility, local control, technology concerns
Data Synthesis	Integrate and interpret multiple types of evidence	Pair a statistic with a passage from the speech and a bill or budget item
Organization	Use varied syntax and transitions	Use consequently, nevertheless, moreover, conversely
Audience & Purpose	Maintain a formal style appropriate to lawmakers and The King Center	Use policy-oriented tone
Language & Conventions	Demonstrate command of standard English	Use precise policy and philosophical language

TEACHER’S TOOLKIT FOR DIVISION 6

Activity 1: Blueprint Policy Audit

Objective: Apply King’s three pillars to school policy.

Students evaluate their own school against King’s test: Does the school affirm dignity? Does it prepare students for excellence? Does it advance beauty, love, justice, and opportunity? Each answer requires evidence, not impression.

KAS Alignment: RI.11-12.1.

Activity 2: “Was King Right?” — Testing the Emerson Prediction

Objective: Evaluate a primary-source claim against evidence.

1. Isolate King’s line: the mousetrap principle “hadn’t always been true — but it will become increasingly true.”
2. Ask: “Dr. King made a prediction in 1967 about whether merit would be rewarded. Nearly sixty years have passed. Was he right?”
3. Students must argue with evidence — mobility data, the broadband gap, graduation rates, hiring practices, or AI’s effect on entry-level work.
4. Push: “If he was partly right, what made the difference — individual excellence, or the laws that changed between then and now?”

KAS Alignment: RH.11-12.8.

Activity 3: Read the Actual Data

Objective: Build statistical literacy.

Students pull raw figures themselves from the Kentucky School Report Card and KDE’s AI in Kentucky K–12 page. Each student must find one Kentucky-specific number not printed in this manual and cite it properly. Discuss: “*What does this number not tell us? What would King’s first principle say is missing from it?*”

KAS Alignment: RH.11-12.7.

Activity 4: AI and Human Dignity Seminar

Objective: Connect modern technology to King’s blueprint.

Discussion questions:

- If AI can produce competent work in seconds, what does King’s “excellence” mean now?
- King said to sweep streets like Michelangelo painted. What is the AI-era version of that sentence?
- What should a student never outsource to a machine?
- Kentucky’s AI guidance insists on keeping “humans in the loop.” Is that a technical rule or a moral one?

KAS Alignment: SL.11-12.1.

Activity 5: Equity Access Map

Objective: Identify unequal access to opportunity.

Students map access to advanced courses, digital tools, broadband, dual credit, mentoring, transportation, career pathways, and extracurricular leadership — then overlay it with the 57%/95% broadband figure and ask what an “AI plan” means in a home without internet.

KAS Alignment: RH.11-12.7.

Activity 6: Policy Brief Research Project

Objective: Help students create specific policy proposals.

Groups research one policy area — AI literacy, CTE and apprenticeships, broadband access, civic education, dual credit, mentoring, or equity audits — and write a brief policy memo with a recommendation.

KAS Alignment: RH.11-12.7.

Activity 7: Fiscal Note Reality Check

Objective: Make policy proposals realistic.

Every student must estimate the cost of the proposal and identify a plausible funding source: state appropriation, pilot program, reallocation, matching grant, or phased implementation. Remind students that the \$3.2 billion in federal relief has expired — “use the federal money” is no longer an answer. A proposal without a funding explanation is returned for revision.

KAS Alignment: W.11-12.1b.

Activity 8: Mock Legislative Hearing

Objective: Practice policy argument.

Assign students as committee members and witnesses. Witnesses deliver three-minute testimony. Committee members must ask at least one hostile question about cost, feasibility, evidence, equity, or local control. Debrief: “*Which testimony survived cross-examination?*”

KAS Alignment: SL.11-12.1.

Activity 9: Advanced Counterclaim Workshop

Objective: Strengthen rebuttal.

Students use four moves: introduce the opposing view with nuance; **concede what is legitimate in it**; rebut with evidence; explain why the claim still stands. The concession is the graded element — a student who cannot concede anything has not understood the opposing view.

KAS Alignment: W.11-12.1b.

Family Activity: Future Work Conversation

Ask:

- What work did you think you would do at my age? What changed?
- What part of your job could a machine do today?
- What part could it never do?

Family Activity: The 1967 Prediction

Read King's Emerson passage together. Ask:

- He said the world would increasingly reward whoever does the best work. Has it?
- What made the difference — effort, or the laws that changed?

Community Activity: Watch Frankfort Work

Watch an Interim Joint Committee on Education meeting online at legislature.ky.gov. Ask:

- What questions do legislators actually ask?
- What kind of evidence moves them?
- What would persuade them to fund something new?

Local History Activity

Research Dr. Dennis H. Anderson. Ask:

- What did he build, and what did it cost him?
- Who would have built it if he had not?