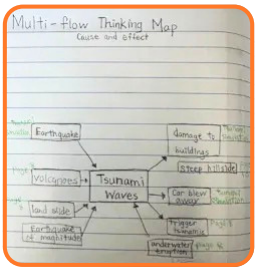
Building a District-Wide Culture of Critical Thinking

Danville Independent Schools | Danville, Kentucky





At Danville Independent Schools, Thinking Maps has grown from a single grant-funded training into a districtwide way of thinking, teaching, and leading.

In a small, close-knit Kentucky district where every school feeds into the next, a deliberate, five-year implementation is turning students into confident, independent writers and thinkers, giving teachers and leaders a shared language for collaboration, from the classroom to the district office.

Danville is a small district with a big track record of instructional innovation: it was one of the first two districts in Kentucky to build a formal Portrait of a Learner, back in 2010. That same spirit of innovation, combined with the flexibility of being a small, feeder system, is what allowed Thinking Maps to move from a handful of interested teachers to a districtwide instructional strategy in just a few years.

Danville's Thinking Maps journey began after the district joined a regional Deeper Learning grant with its Kentucky educational co-op. Teacher leaders on the district's Deeper Learning team went through Thinking Maps training first, and came back talking about the impact they were already seeing in student work; original, un-coached thinking that was clearly the students' own.

That was enough to convince the district's leadership and principals to bring the training to every school and teacher with a team of administrative trainers. The response was immediate. Because Danville is a small district with a clear feeder structure, leaders realized they didn't need to pilot Thinking Maps school by school; they could commit to it district-wide from the start and built a five-year plan to do it with fidelity.

DISTRICT SNAPSHOT

Danville Independent Schools

4 schools, Pre K-12:
Mary G. Hogsett Primary, Edna L. Toliver Intermediate, John W. Bate Middle, Danville High

- **1,835 students**
- **150 teachers (340 total staff)**
- **1:1 devices: iPads (K-1) and Chromebooks (2–12)**
- **Thinking Maps piloted 2023–24; full district-wide rollout 2024–25**

Anchored by the district's own Portrait of a Danville Learner

> **"Thinking Maps give leaders a shared visual language to clarify complex ideas, align priorities, and drive strategic action turning conversations into solutions."**
>
> Ron Ballard — Superintendent, Danville Independent Schools

That commitment extends well beyond the classroom: Danville's Superintendent, principals and even its Chief Financial Officer use Thinking Maps routinely in staff meetings, retreats, and new hire onboarding; departments with nothing to do with instruction. Maps they have used include Tree Maps to clarify roles in departments to Brace Maps used to lay out staff benefits for new hires

Danville Independent Schools

DANVILLE'S THINKING MAPS IMPLEMENTATION ROADMAP

2023-24
Initial training pilot & trainer team formed

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2024-25
Districtwide rollout of all 8 Maps; students build foundational Map knowledge. Setting the Stage & Narrative pilots

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2025-26
Path to Proficiency training for ML staff; increased focus on students selecting and applying Maps independently

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2026-27
Expository Writing pilot and Response to Text added

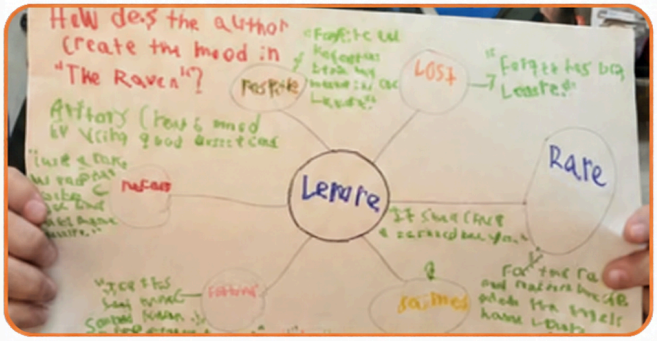
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Beyond
Sustaining commitment to districtwide as staff and students turn over

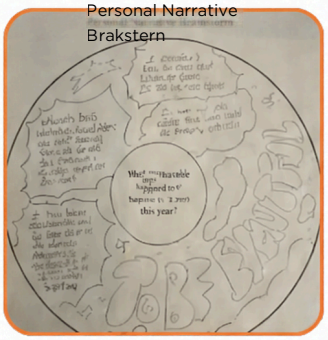
A DELIBERATE, FIVE-YEAR IMPLEMENTATION

Danville Independent Schools committed to a systematic implementation designed to build capacity over time. The district began by establishing a common visual language for thinking across schools and grade levels. As teachers and students became more fluent with the eight Thinking Maps and the thinking associated with each, the focus expanded to purposeful classroom application and greater student ownership. Ongoing professional learning has helped teachers strengthen implementation and support students in selecting and applying the Maps independently.

Building on its Thinking Maps implementation, Danville expanded its professional learning through *Write From the Beginning...and Beyond*. The district began with *Setting the Stage* and continued with *Narrative, Response to Text, and Expository* professional learning. Training teachers across grade levels has helped create greater continuity in how students develop, organize, communicate, and write about their thinking.







Personal Narrative
Brakstern

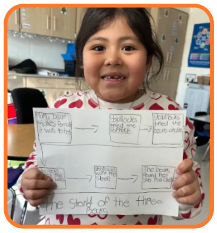


"We try to get examples of Thinking Maps that are used by our own students to show off across the district, instead of relying on examples from somewhere else."

Suzanne Farmer leads Thinking Maps implementation, Danville Independent Schools

FROM PRESCHOOL TO SENIOR YEAR, IN EVERY SUBJECT

Danville's teachers describe Thinking Maps as far more than a fancier graphic organizer. First-grade teacher Jennifer Westerfield, who experienced Thinking Maps herself as a student, calls them a "gamechanger":



"I have seen a massive improvement in student writing simply because they understand the components needed for various kinds of writing. Students first learned how to speak from their Maps and later learned how to transfer their ideas into a written paragraph." Fifth-grade teacher Angel Davis has watched her students use a Double Bubble Map to compare wave types and a Multi-Flow Map to examine the causes and effects of a natural disaster using information from multiple sources. "I've seen tremendous growth in my students' ability to organize complex science ideas and clearly explain cause-and-effect relationships," she says.

Fourth-grade teacher Tania Busto ties Maps directly to reading standards: "I found there was a significant improvement in their understanding of the standards and how to apply them to our daily work."

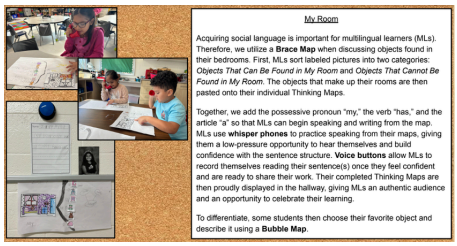
At the high school level, English teacher Laurie Pierce uses Thinking Maps to help students make their thinking visible throughout the narrative writing process. Students use Maps based on the type of thinking a task requires, helping them break complex work into more manageable parts. "What I've liked best about the Maps is that they've helped me break the writing process down into chunks that feel more manageable for the students," she says, "and reduce the screen time involved in the writing process."

Danville High Principal Danny Goodwin has brought the same visual language for thinking to staff learning. Staff used a Circle Map to generate and define characteristics of an effective classroom, then organized those ideas into categories with a Tree Map to identify key look-fors.

A GAME-CHANGER FOR MULTILINGUAL LEARNERS

Danville's Multilingual Learner team has completed Path to Proficiency professional learning, using Thinking Maps to make thinking and academic language visible for students developing English proficiency. Teachers have used Maps to support language development, including Bridge Maps to develop relational language, and paired Maps with tools such as whisper phones so students can rehearse their thinking orally before communicating it in writing.

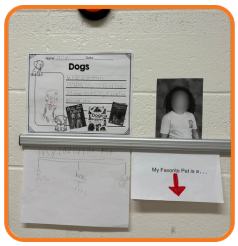
At Mary G. Hogsett Primary School, MLL instructor Mindi Carrier has seen that shared visual language take hold with her youngest multilingual learners. Thinking Maps give students a concrete way to organize and communicate their thinking while building the academic language to express it. Students can move from thinking visually, to rehearsing ideas orally, to communicating them in complete sentences with increasing independence and confidence.


My Room

Acquiring social language is important for multilingual learners (MLs). Therefore, we utilize a **Brace Map** when discussing objects found in their bedrooms. First, MLs sort labeled pictures into two categories: *Objects That Can Be Found in My Room* and *Objects That Cannot Be Found in My Room*. The objects that make up their rooms are then pasted onto their individual Thinking Maps.

Together, we add the possessive pronoun "my," the verb "has," and the article "a" so that MLs can begin speaking and writing from the map. MLs use **whisper phones** to practice speaking from their maps, giving them a low-pressure opportunity to hear themselves and build confidence with the sentence structure. **Voice buttons** allow MLs to record themselves reading their sentence(s) once they feel confident and are ready to share their work. Their completed Thinking Maps are then proudly displayed in the hallway, giving MLs an authentic audience and an opportunity to celebrate their learning.

To differentiate, some students then choose their favorite object and describe it using a **Bubble Map**.



Examples of whisper phones, voice buttons, and photos used in MLL Instructor Mindi Carrier's class.

"Thinking Maps have been extremely beneficial for my Multilingual Learners. I have seen students become more confident and independent as they move from organizing ideas on a map to speaking and writing complete sentences. For me, Thinking Maps provide the structure, while the 'gimmicks', whisper phones, voice buttons, pictures provide the engagement!"

Mindi Carrier, NBCT
MLL Instructor, Mary G. Hogsett Primary School

STUDENTS TAKE OWNERSHIP OF THEIR THINKING



> **"I wish more people understood that this isn't some sort of add-on program. It's a strategy for improving instruction - one that works for everybody, all types of learners, across all contexts, including adults. We've seen a real difference in how the adults in our district work together because of it."**
>
> **Suzanne Farmer —** Leads Thinking Maps Implementation, Danville Independent Schools

The clearest evidence of impact is showing up in how students describe themselves. Each spring, **Bate Middle School's eighth graders** present Gateway projects reflecting on their growth against the district's Portrait of a Danville Learner. At the district's 2026 Gateway showcase, one eighth grader told his panel that he now loves writing, which is something he never expected to say, because Thinking Maps gave him a plan he could return to even after an interruption. Once his ideas were mapped out, he said, he no longer had to "think about" the writing itself, he just followed the plan he'd already built.

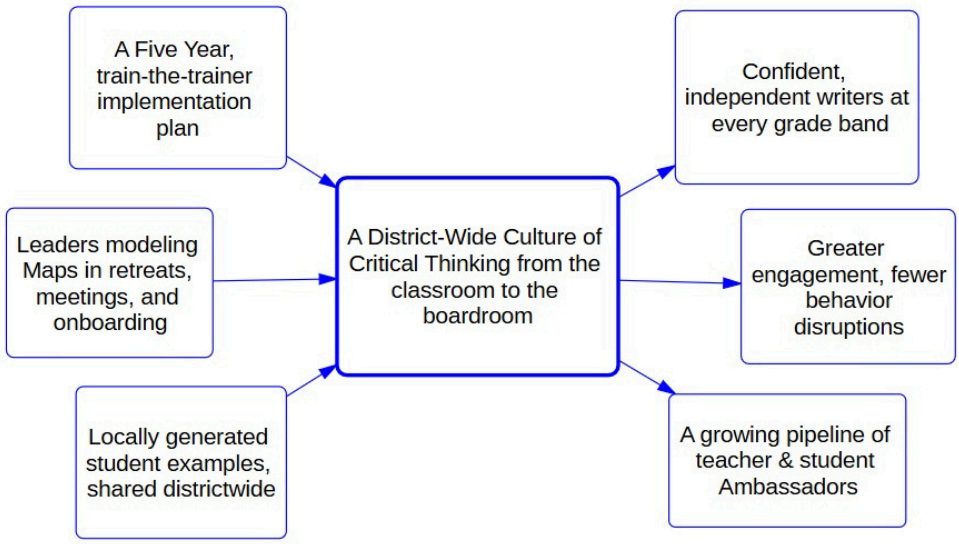
Younger students are showing the same ownership. At Hogsett Primary, one first grader who came to school an "empowered person" but not yet an "empowered learner" took off with Thinking Maps so completely that she began making Maps everywhere including teaching a bus monitor how build one during her ride home. One of the district's earliest Thinking Maps adopters was a preschool teacher, and the impact was visible enough that other families began asking about it when their four-year-olds came home mapping their own thinking.

~85%
of Hogsett first graders without prior kindergarten Thinking Maps instruction met year-end writing expectations following a three-week intensive introduction

5 year
Districtwide implementation plan designed to build fluency, student ownership, and long-term sustainability

10+
Active district cadres built around shared thinking practices and continuous improvement

Danville Independent Schools:
Journey to Creating a Culture of Critical Thinkers



Note-All photos, quotes, and information provided in partnership with the Danville Independent School District.