College Access Begins in Middle School

How Ignite builds opportunity in Muhlenberg County

Rachel Evitts
Program Manager, Ignite

Student Access Summit November 2, 2026

A student in your community

What could keep a capable middle school student from seeing college as a realistic option?

Introducing Ignite

Ignite helps Muhlenberg County middle school students explore their futures and prepare for life beyond school.

Students build confidence, work ethic, and college and career aspirations through hands-on experiences and supportive relationships.



Ignite in Muhlenberg County

Three years of continued support

A cohort-based college and career readiness program for grades 6–8.

Students with strong potential

Additional opportunities for students with limited resources or exposure.

A community partnership

Muhlenberg County Public Schools, Felix E. Martin Jr. Foundation, colleges, employers, and community organizations.

The barriers Ignite addresses

Barrier	Ignite’s response
Limited exposure to college	Campus visits beginning in sixth grade
Few connections to careers and professionals	Career tours, job shadowing, and community mentors
Uncertainty about future possibilities	Experiences that connect student interests with education
Limited opportunities to practice workplace skills	Work opportunities and continued adult support

What students experience

Exploring possibilities

College visits

Career tours and job shadowing

Summer camps and new settings

Building readiness

Soft & career skills curriculum

Work opportunities

Community service and civic engagement







College visits begin in sixth grade

Sixth grade

Owensboro Community & Technical College

Seventh grade

Western Kentucky University

Eighth grade

Murray State University



Dedicated classroom at Madisonville Community College Muhlenberg Campus for monthly soft skills training

Career exploration gives education a purpose

What Ignite provides

Career tours with local employers

Job shadowing experiences

Conversations with working adults

What students can explore

What a job involves each day

Which skills a worker uses

How education connects to a career







Work opportunities build readiness

01

Work ethic

Showing up, following through, and completing a task.

02

Soft skills

Communicating respectfully and working with others.

03

Responsibility

Managing expectations and learning from feedback.





Relationships make opportunities approachable

Within the program

Recurring lunch clubs

Continued contact across three years

Mentors and supportive adults

Across the community

College and employer connections

Family communication

Service and civic participation







Partnerships expand what Ignite can offer

Partner	Contribution to the student experience
Schools	Student connections and coordination
Muhlenberg Achieves and the Foundation	Program support and coordination
Colleges – Madisonville Community College	Exposure to campuses and educational pathways
Employers and community organizations	Career experiences, mentors, and work or service opportunities

How Ignite expands early college access

Access to information

Students encounter campuses and connect education with careers.

Access to people

Students meet adults who can explain pathways and opportunities.

Access to experience

Students practice skills and explore possibilities before high school.



Practical lessons from the Ignite model

Earlier contact creates room for exploration

Middle school offers time to ask questions, encounter different options, and form a college going identity.

Repeated experiences support continued learning

A familiar adult and a next opportunity keep the conversation going.

Partnerships connect learning to real settings

Schools, colleges, and employers each contribute something students can use.

One connection to strengthen

Where could your institution connect with students earlier?

What barrier could one existing partnership help address?

Questions about Ignite

Rachel Evitts
rachel.evitts@muhlenberg.kyschools.us