



THE POWER OF 3: ALLEGHENY VALLEY'S CALMING SPACES HELP REJUVENATE EVERYONE



Just a few weeks before the world shut down in March 2020, Allegheny Valley School District Superintendent Dr. Patrick Graczyk

traveled to the Cajon Valley School District in San Diego.

There he laid eyes on “wellness centers” — spaces within a public school building where kids could get support with stress and learn social-emotional skills to help them handle day-to-day challenges.

Graczyk took photos. He compared notes with the Pittsburgh-area superintendents he was traveling with and asked questions of the folks at Cajon Valley. He returned home inspired to create the same kind of resource for his own students.

Seeing Cajon Valley, he says, “prompted a conversation with the leaders about, ‘Hey, do we want to do something similar?’”

Allegheny Valley Elementary’s principal, Gregory Heavner, was totally on board with the idea of creating a wellness space in his building. “Even pre-COVID, we had a lot of kids coming in for a timeout to reset after an outburst, or maybe

they had uncontrolled emotions,” he says. “They were struggling.”

With his counseling background, Heavner knew to offer kids puzzles or drawing materials. As they used those tools, he says, “their mind went somewhere else. Then I could find out why they were having trouble controlling their emotions. They could reset and be able to have a positive day.”

But doing that in his small conference room had its limits, he says. “We didn’t have the resources in there that we needed.”

The pandemic lockdown put all things temporarily on hold, but it also reinforced the idea that a dedicated space for social-emotional wellbeing and learning was a necessity.

“COVID became a catalyst,” Graczyk says. “Out of any bad situation, you can always find good if you look hard enough and find things to learn from.”

Today, Heavner’s elementary building is home to a work-in-progress called “Our 3 Room.” It’s named for the fact that the room belongs to everyone and for its role as a place to practice the three R’s: reset, refocus, return to learning.

COMFORTING AND CALMING

When students enter Our 3 Room, Heavner says, they find themselves in what feels like “an underwater ocean environment.”

The lighting is subdued and bubble tubes are filled with water and artificial fish. As the bubbles and synthetic jellyfish move rhythmically, the reflection plays on the ceiling. The tubes emit a calming light and low vibration.

Fidget toys, guided imagery videos, games, and other resources are available. So are caring adults, ready to offer support or just a friendly ear.

“We have some outside services coming in,” says the district’s curriculum and instruction coordinator, Jennifer Vecchio. “Our social worker will be in there. Our counselors will be in there. And we’re working through some ways of having other staff members in there at times.”

Spaces like these have begun to pop up in middle schools and high schools in the Pittsburgh region. They’re less common at the elementary level. This one is already making a difference for kids at Allegheny Valley.

"They definitely are saying they feel better knowing the room exists," Heavner says.

Recently, Heavner and a guidance counselor worked with a student who was struggling with anger. In Our 3 Room, he began playing with a light board, making various figures. Soon, "he opened up more than ever before," Heavner says. "We're not changing a lot of how we're addressing it. It's just the environment that's changed."

BUILDING ON PROGRESS

As Graczyk and Heavner continue developing Our 3 Room, they compare notes with other districts within the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance. This regional alliance of school districts works with one another and partners across the country to create schools where student well-being and equity are top priorities.

Led by AASA, The School Superintendents Association, and by local superintendents including Graczyk, the Alliance convenes for workshops, networking opportunities, and professional development that help districts like Allegheny Valley build on the work they're most passionate about.

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Throughout this school year, the project keeps on evolving.

"I'm now working on creating a calming cocoon," Heavner says, "so they can step into something just filled with that calming atmosphere."

He envisions Our 3 Room as a place to help not just students but also their families. It could be, he says, a place where short-term counseling could take place, where people can sit with grief and loss, or where a student can start the day in a positive and low-stress way.

Leaders at Allegheny Valley often talk about the results of a school climate survey that showed that students "like school, and they want to be at school," Vecchio says. "But they don't necessarily know how to connect with people while at school. Their coping strategies were lacking."

That led to the notion of mainstreaming these strategies as a regular part of the day. For kids

and for their parents, these small changes can pay big dividends.

"Our community relies heavily on our school district," Vecchio says. "We're trying to cast a wider net with this, because if our students have the skills and practice those skills at home, and talk to Mom and Dad, talk to Grandma, talk to aunts and uncles, everyone benefits."

