



IN EXCAVATING THEIR COMMUNITY'S PAST, BROWNSVILLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT STUDENTS FIND THEIR FUTURES

There was no way around demolishing the abandoned buildings in downtown Brownsville. They were crumbling, but the inevitability of the demolition didn't make it any less upsetting for local families. They have pride in this small borough that sits an hour south of Pittsburgh, which traces its history back to a trading post opened in the wake of the American revolution.

Fortunately, the Brownsville Area School District found a way to build a unique link to these buildings and the proud history they represent. In collaboration with the University of Pittsburgh, Carnegie Mellon University, and other Pittsburgh-area partners, they used 3D laser scanning and photogrammetry (the art and science of extracting 3D information from photographs) to digitally preserve these downtown structures.

High school students use this online gallery of imagery in an elective course called the Portals Project. Using virtual and augmented reality

technology, they research the history of the virtually recreated buildings and embed their findings into an interactive virtual reality experience that the whole community can engage with.

The class incorporates every aspect of STEAM learning as students explore the relationships between architecture, engineering, technology, entrepreneurship, historical research, and creative design. Along the way, they collaborate with universities, local community organizations, the Brownsville Chamber of Commerce, and local businesses, making valuable contacts that can help as they pursue college and careers.

For a school that just five years ago lacked any focus on STEAM learning, this course is a big accomplishment.

But to Brownsville Area superintendent Keith Hartbauer, the Portals Project has a significance that goes beyond academic learning. To him, its real magic is the pride that students build in their community.

As virtual time travelers, they discover a Brownsville that can

be hard to remember during the post-pandemic struggles of 2023 — especially for students whose families are struggling. This new understanding of the place they call home may be the key ingredient that helps them build a thriving future for themselves and for the historic borough of Brownsville.

FIVE YEARS OF EFFORT

The Portals Project is a milestone Hartbauer has been working toward ever since he arrived in the district in 2017.

He remembers vividly the first time he drove into downtown Brownsville. The town's main street was desolate, he says. As his car rolled past a succession of empty sidewalks and boarded-up buildings, he stopped at a red light. Looking around, Hartbauer says, he asked himself: What on earth am I doing? Am I crazy, wanting this job?

"Then I pulled up on our campus, which is absolutely beautiful," he says. "And I said to myself, there's hope. But I realized that if we don't get this right from an educational standpoint, the school district is

the last thing standing. We need to raise kids who are going to be able to produce the outcomes the community is going to need down the road.”

One of the keys to helping Brownsville has been to look outside its borders for fresh ideas, new sources of funding, and a chance to collaborate and learn from other school districts in the Pittsburgh region and beyond.

Brownsville is part of the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working with peers locally and across the country to create student-centered, equity-focused schools. Led by local superintendents, including Hartbauer, and by AASA, the School Superintendents Association, the Alliance convenes for workshops, networking opportunities, and professional development that helps districts like Brownsville build on the work they're most passionate about.

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“Once we got involved in Learning 2025, our district just catapulted. We were able to do a lot of things and provide resources,” Hartbauer says. “I was able to take a team of teachers and administrators to national conferences. For some of the teachers, it was the first time in their careers that they'd ever been out of Brownsville. They got to see what's out there and where education is moving, and they brought a sense of energy back that has reinvigorated all of us.”

Hartbauer believes in his teachers and his students. He looks at the Portals Project and sees what

they've been able to accomplish. He's confident that they can be the key to lifting up their entire community.

The revitalization of Brownsville has to “come from its greatest resources,” he says. “And its greatest resources are the young men and women who are walking in the hallways of our school district.”

