



AT DEER LAKES, 'REIMAGINING HIGH SCHOOL' MEANS LEARNING FROM THE COMMUNITY — AND FROM OTHER SCHOOLS, TOO

American teenagers are struggling with anxiety in record numbers. What if they could learn powerful ways to cope with stress and share their feelings — and do it together in ways that normalize the pursuit of mental well-being?

That's what happens at Deer Lakes High School during an innovative class called Mental Toughness, an alternative to the standard gym and health class. Kids meet their physical education requirement for graduation. But rather than learning competitive sports skills, they're discovering powerful strategies for mental well-being.

Mental Toughness blends physical and behavioral health in actionable ways, says assistant principal Ryan Aleski. "It's how to deal with sleep hygiene, how to deal with nutrition — all of those things that make up your mental well-being and your mental toughness and your overall health."

For kids who dread gym, it's a welcome alternative. To the administrative team at this small district in Pittsburgh's northern suburbs, it's something more —

a solid example of the ways they're actively preparing teenagers for the fast-changing adult world.

"We've been reimagining high school," says district superintendent Dr. Janell Logue-Belden. "We're not saying throw away traditional high school. We've done a great job as a traditional high school. But we're really asking, 'What can we do now?' As the world is changing, what are the needs?"

LISTENING AND DISCOVERING

Like many schools in Western Pennsylvania, Deer Lakes has been holding community meetings as it builds a 21st-century vision for the school's graduates.

"We're really listening to the community and to students," Logue-Belden says. "This isn't my school district. It's *their* school district."

Deer Lakes has also been looking outside its borders for inspiration — comparing notes with nearby districts and some that are farther away as a member of the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance. That group is a regional cohort of school districts working together — and with peers across the country — to create student-centered, equity-

focused schools that prepare every learner for tomorrow.

Led by AASA, The School Superintendents Association, and local superintendents including Logue-Belden, the Alliance meets for workshops, networking opportunities, and professional development. Aleski and Deer Lakes High School principal Patrick Baughman have been among those visiting other districts.

"We've been meeting about once a month since the beginning of the school year to talk to each other and get an idea of what each district is doing," Baughman says. "Things that are working well in their buildings, things that we're struggling with — being able to use each other as a sounding board to work things through."

It's been a chance to discover new ideas — and to realize that much of the impressive work happening in other districts is just like what's underway at Deer Lakes.

DISCOVERING SHARED APPROACHES

On a trip last year to the private Hawken School in Cleveland, Baughman and Aleski witnessed innovative learning — everything

