



LIGHTING THE WAY: HOW THE FOX CHAPEL AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT PREPARES TOMORROW'S EARLY LEARNERS

A As usual, Fred Rogers showed us the way. Summer was over, and with the nation's students approaching their first day of school, *Mister Rogers'*

Neighborhood offered a televised tour of kindergarten. Taking a look around a classroom, Fred found kid-sized tables and chairs; closets and bathrooms "just like at home;" and a real teacher who couldn't wait to welcome her students. He even rode a school bus, introducing viewers to the driver.

The goal, he later explained, was to make kindergarten less frightening to young learners. Fred understood that for children — and often, their families, too — transitions can be stressful. "You have so many people who care about you," Fred assured families. "We want you to like school, because there's so much you can learn that will be helpful to you for a long, long time!"

Nearly 50 years later, a school district in Fred's real-life neighborhood offers that same caring guidance. In the Fox Chapel

Area School District near Pittsburgh, kindergarten begins long before the first day of school: Starting in February and continuing through August, the district hosts storytimes and meet-and-greets that give young learners a chance to meet their teachers, tour their future classrooms, and even ride a school bus.

The aim is to do for Fox Chapel Area's learners what Fred Rogers did for viewers. "We work to help kids feel comfortable and to start building relationships," says Mary Catherine Reljac, the district's superintendent. "We want them to see and touch and experience everything our kindergarten can offer."

While incoming kindergartners are getting to know their teachers, Fox Chapel Area also hosts sessions with parents, introducing them to key personnel and equipping them with tools to support children's literacy and fine motor skills at home. The result, says Reljac, are family-school relationships that support students' academic, developmental, and social-emotional growth.

"That's what we're focused on here in Fox Chapel Area," she says. "Our students' needs come first — always."

It's one reason the district joined the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working together — and with peers across the country — to create student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven schools that prepare every learner for tomorrow. Led by local superintendents and AASA, The School Superintendents Association, the Alliance convenes for workshops, networking opportunities, and professional development that helps districts like Fox Chapel Area do what they do best: meet learners' needs at every stage of their journey.

In Fox Chapel Area, that work begins even before a student enrolls. "Our teachers attend to little 'look-fors' as they get to know their incoming kindergartners," explains Ashley Constantine, the district's executive director of elementary education and instruction. "Are they comfortable with their peers? How do they do when their parents leave

the room? Can they write their name? Identify colors?"

For incoming students who could benefit from additional support, the district offers a 20-day Summer Learning Academy, giving learners extra time with teachers, counselors, and other school staff. The difference, says Constantine, "can be pretty amazing." After attending the academy, students who'd been upset to leave their parents in the spring arrive in August eager for the first day of school. "They're so happy to be in kindergarten, and the transition becomes much easier for families, too."

In addition to its transitional programming, the district also hosts twice-yearly Early Learning Forums for area childcare providers, offering professional development on everything from technology to environmental education. The Forums are a win-win, Constantine says. "They help us get a sense of our learners' needs, and they help childcare providers align their practices so that learners are ready for school."

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Perhaps it's no wonder that in 2022, AASA named Fox Chapel Area a "Lighthouse" district for its innovative, intentional early learning programs. The prestigious designation — awarded to just 21 school districts out of more than 13,000 nationwide — celebrates Fox Chapel Area as a place that's lighting the way for others.

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Already, the designation has sparked a slew of interest from districts that want to learn from Fox Chapel Area's approach. And more importantly, says Reljac, it offers an opportunity for Fox Chapel Area to continue to

learn from others. "There's still so much we want to learn and improve. And with this Lighthouse award and with the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, we're going to keep learning and keep doing better for our kids."

And in that sense, Reljac echoes Mister Rogers himself.

Wrapping up his tour of the neighborhood kindergarten, Fred explained that the first day of school was only the beginning. "Going to school," he said, "is like discovering a whole new place. In fact, each time you go back, you have the chance of discovering something new — something you didn't know before!"

