



“WE ARE THE COMMON GROUND”

HOW NEW BRIGHTON SCHOOL DISTRICT SERVES AS A POWERFUL COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

One evening last August, families streamed in and out of the New Brighton High School gym. Summer hadn't ended yet, but the district's 600 elementary schoolers had been invited for New Brighton's inaugural "Back-to-School Bash."

An army of volunteers had set up the festivities along the sidewalks and parking lot that link the district's high school and the elementary school. Rain and wind forced them to relocate inside. But judging from the joyful party that was unfolding, nobody seemed to mind.

Inside the gym, the sound of squealing kids filling a bouncy house could be heard over dance tunes spun by a DJ. A makeshift dance floor filled up quickly. Parents who'd come straight from work wrangled kids in front of tables serving a free dinner, while others lined up in front of an old-timey popcorn machine.

Kids got their faces painted, then roamed the gym searching for the people they most wanted to set eyes on: their new teachers.

New Brighton teacher Emily Carson met some of her incoming

first-graders and their families that night. Kindergarten teachers from the previous year made the introductions.

"I got to know them a little bit and I think that helped them be less nervous about coming to first grade," says Carson, whose kids attend New Brighton schools. "Some of the children have social barriers and needs, so it helped. I thought it was just magical to see all those people come out and be there."

Nearly six months later, one thing is clear: This was more than a magical night. It was a foundation for an entire philosophy of engagement.

MANY GOALS, ONE GATHERING

Parents had come to this event – a resource fair, a meet-and-greet, and a chance for normalcy after two pandemic-impacted school years – for a wide range of reasons. Some got much-needed free school supplies. Others connected with dozens of community organizations that had set up tables.

"You had the bounce house and the popcorn machine, and the kids are having fun over here and getting their face painted over there," says New Brighton superintendent

Dr. Joseph Guarino. "But then you had the parent walking past the Rotary Club, or walking past the public library table, and the library folks are signing them up for library cards."

Big Brothers Big Sisters had a table as well, Guarino says, to sign up elementary schoolers to be "littles" within their program, and to invite older siblings to serve as "bigs" helping to run an afterschool program.

"You just watched all this going on and you realize: This family right here may have never gone down to the public library and gotten a library card. But they have one now. And the fire department was there, not only giving out their fun plastic fire hats and all that kind of stuff, but looking for volunteer firefighters, too," he says. "The borough was there. A couple of council members came. It was just remarkable how it spread beyond being a school event to a whole community event."

From recreational sports leagues to local churches, it seemed like the whole town was staffing a table. And just as Guarino and his team had hoped, parents attended in record numbers.

SCHOOL AS COMMUNITY CONNECTOR

That night remains a high point for teachers and families alike, says elementary school principal Jason Hall.

“After not seeing your classmates for months, it was just an instant rush of energy for everyone,” he says. “I can honestly say everybody left there happy.”

But the impact of the event, and the mindset behind it, continue to guide further innovation at New Brighton. “Our motto for the school year was to embrace the fact that we are the hub,” Hall says. “So ‘Embrace the Hub’ became kind of a slogan.”

Hall helped plan this event along with a team that includes Carson and also New Brighton parent and PTO leader Julie Smith, as part of a research and grantmaking initiative called Parents as Allies. New Brighton is one of 22 districts in the Pittsburgh region using human-centered design to build stronger

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connections between schools and families as part of Parents as Allies.

New Brighton also participates in the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working together to create student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven schools. Led by local superintendents and by AASA, The School Superintendents Association, the Alliance gives Guarino a chance to brainstorm about issues like family/school engagement with peers throughout the Pittsburgh region and nationally.

New Brighton’s back-to-school event illustrated just how eager families are to engage – assuming schools can connect in ways that work for them.

“For two hours, we had more people walking around the gym – more parents – than we would ever get to a traditional parent event,” Guarino says. “And we realized, what we were scheduling and what we were doing in the past wasn’t working, because it’s not what modern day, current families need, have time for, or want. We need to meet them where they are, and we can do that.”

