



“COME SEE WHAT WE’RE DOING”

THE NEW CASTLE AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT SPARKS JOYFUL LEARNING FOR STUDENTS AND TEACHERS ALIKE

Picture this: You’re a third-grader who lives in a Boston apartment. Your father, the building’s superintendent, enlists your help in “the Great Pigeon War” against the birds who soil the stoop. You’ve watched him try one strategy after another, and you’re beginning to suspect that Mrs. Jacobi, the woman who lives upstairs, is somehow summoning the pigeons. But you can’t confront her, because she pays you to run her errands and you desperately need the money.

You’re saving up, after all, to buy your own gorilla.

It’s a conundrum only a third-grader could face. But one day, it hits you: an idea that could end the Great Pigeon War and save the day for everyone.

This is the plot of *Clementine*, the beloved, bestselling children’s novel. And it’s at this moment — just before the brilliant idea’s reveal — that Rosemary Maggie stops reading aloud and sets the book aside.

“I don’t want students to know how it ends,” says the school librarian, laughing. “At least, not yet.”

Instead, Maggie’s library becomes

the site of something else: a course called Novel Engineering. For four weeks, students in the New Castle Area School District become engineers tasked with helping their “clients”: characters from books like *Clementine*. Students dream solutions to problems like the Pigeon War, working together to build functional, real-life models from everyday materials.

For *Clementine*, that might mean redesigning an apartment building’s balconies or installing self-cleaning tarps. “You should see some of the things they build,” says Maggie. “What they’re able to do with simple things like paper towel tubes is just amazing.”

The result is a library full of highly engaged kids learning not only science and math, but also the life skills that tomorrow’s careers demand: creativity, collaboration, communication, and more.

It’s just one way the New Castle Area School District prepares its students for the future. “You walk through our classrooms and you see kids being active participants in their learning,” says Tabitha Marino, New Castle’s assistant to the superintendent.

“They work on problem solving. They tinker in makerspaces. They consider each others’ opinions and

learn to work in teams — all this helps students develop qualities and skills that are important for when they leave our district’s doors.”

It’s this approach that first drew New Castle to the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working together — and with peers around 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.

“Working with the Alliance has allowed us to look beyond our district and really see what’s out there,” says Marino. “What are other schools doing? What can we bring back to New Castle and adapt for the kids we serve? And how can we take what we’re doing and make it even better?”

With support from the Alliance, the district is bringing concepts like Novel Engineering into its core classes, from English to social studies. Working with renowned partners like the Consortium for Public Education, New Castle’s

teachers are making “little bets” designed to make classrooms more active; more joyful; and ultimately, more effective.

“I’ve never seen teachers so excited,” says Marino. “They’re calling me. They’re texting me. They’re inviting me into their classrooms and saying, ‘Come see what we’re doing!’”

This sense of pride permeates the district. In a town where the median household income is half as high as the national average — and where almost every student qualifies for free and reduced-price lunch — the New Castle Area School District has established itself as a leader when it comes to innovation. The district’s annual summer camp, Tinker Tank, invites teachers and students from across the region to use laser cutters, 3D printers, robotics kits, and more. And throughout the year, the district regularly hosts educators who want to learn from New Castle’s classrooms.

“That’s the other great thing about the Alliance,” says Marino. “It’s allowed us, as a district, to be learners and leaders at the same

“I’ve never seen teachers so excited,” says Marino.
“They’re calling me. They’re texting me. They’re inviting me into their classrooms and saying, ‘Come see what we’re doing!’”

time. We have people visiting us to see what we are doing.”

Come see what we’re doing, indeed.

By the way: The Novel Engineering students do get to finish their books. After they present their projects to their teachers and peers — explaining how they developed their idea, why it would work, and what they’ve learned along the way — Rosemary Maggie picks up the novel and reads the ending aloud. In *Clementine*, the Great Pigeon War ends when the book’s third-grade hero convinces Mrs. Jacobi to feed the birds from a different window. The pigeons flock to the alley instead of the stoop, and *Clementine*’s father throws her a party to celebrate.

It’s an ending that’s not lost on the New Castle Area School

District, where adults make a point of celebrating student learning. Nearly every day on the district’s social media feeds, Marino posts something to make families and students proud. “Our goal is to show something great,” she says, “because our students *are* great. And so are their teachers. And they all deserve to be recognized.”

