



INDULGING JOY AND RADIATING EXCELLENCE IN THE SOUTH FAYETTE TOWNSHIP SCHOOL DISTRICT

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When school lets out for summer vacation, the last thing anyone wants is homework. But for teachers in the South Fayette Township School

District near Pittsburgh, homework is exactly what they got.

As the district concluded its 2021-22 school year — one made monumentally difficult by the COVID-19 pandemic, leadership transitions, and more — South Fayette’s administrators wanted teachers and staff “to just restore themselves and truly indulge in joy,” says Kristin Deichler, assistant superintendent. “So we gave them a little summer challenge.”

Educators have long used June and July to hone their professional practice and plan for the coming school year. But this “summer challenge” looked a little different.

Deichler and South Fayette’s Superintendent, Michelle Miller, gave their cell phone numbers to everyone in the district, from teachers and support staff to food service and maintenance. The assignment? “Put work aside. Spend the summer involved in joyful and rejuvenating endeavors. When

you’re out and about, just send us a picture of something that brings you joy,” Deichler explains.

There were no rules or criteria. “It was just: ‘However you define joy, please share it, and we’ll send out a prize once a week.’”

Deichler and Miller weren’t sure how South Fayette’s staff would react (or whether worn-out teachers would want to participate at all). But then their cell phones started to buzz — a sound that lasted all summer. The pictures came nearly every day, with Deichler and Miller responding to every single one.

The summer project set the tone for the school year to come. “Learning should be a joyful event,” says Miller. “Kids should have joy in their learning. Teachers should have joy in their teaching. And it’s this kind of environment — where there’s joy, a sense of belonging, and high-quality instruction — that all of our students deserve.”

It’s a belief that prompted South Fayette to join the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working to create student-centered, and equity-focused, future-driven schools that prepare every learner for tomorrow. The Alliance, says

Miller, has connected South Fayette to expert speakers and a national network of innovators, all of whom support the district in its quest to “radiate excellence.”

It was through the Alliance, for example, that Miller and Deichler learned from a district in Texas — “one that had given their teachers a really candid survey,” says Deichler. She and Miller decided to try something similar, asking South Fayette’s staff to submit anonymous feedback. “We said, ‘What can we give you that would help you be the best educator you can be?’” They also asked, “What can we remove from your plate that would not impact student learning?”

Nearly every response, they found, focused on well-being — something experts consider essential for high-performing school districts. That’s why Miller and Deichler launched the summertime joy assignment and several district-wide changes, including work-from-home clerical days for teachers and redesigned walkthroughs that focus less on compliance and more on celebrating student learning.

South Fayette’s administrators now visit every building twice a month, leaving feedback and personal notes

that nurture relationships among teachers, staff, and students.

Something has shifted as a result. South Fayette's classrooms, says Deichler, radiate excellence from the inside out: from happier, more productive educators to students who feel safe, cared-for, and seen. "We've received several unsolicited messages [from the South Fayette staff members]. We're getting emails. We're getting cards. And as a district, we're just getting started."

South Fayette's new strategic plan codifies the district's focus on being "Future-Focused, Student-Centered, Innovation-Driven." This strategic plan provides a roadmap for developing "Lion Learners": students who radiate excellence themselves. Lion Learners are curious, compassionate, collaborative leaders and community builders.

As Miller and Deichler walk through South Fayette's schools, they meet more and more such learners every day.

The post-COVID years in schools have been challenging, and many of the engaging and joyful parts of school diminished. Miller shared the need to revisit how these creative

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approaches to instruction can and should return.

"The students have so many ideas about how to create those environments where there's play and laughter and fun," says Miller. "So, when they ask to try new things, our answer is almost always 'yes.'"

Can schools have assemblies where the band performs for students? *Yes.* Can the performing arts students stage a musical for the middle school? *Sure thing.* Can students in a math class build their answers with clay? *Well, why not?*

"The instruction will still be there, because our teachers have high expectations for all of our students," says Miller. "But building with clay can enhance instruction. Experiencing a musical can promote creativity. It might look different than

the typical phonics or math lesson, but things like this are every bit as important."

Students, teachers, and families agree. Perhaps it's no wonder that the South Fayette Township School District — with its Lion Learners, its support from the Alliance, and its joy — now ranks among the fastest-growing school districts in all of Pennsylvania and was identified as District of the Decade from 2011-2020.

Radiating excellence, indeed.

