



**CORNELL
SCHOOL
DISTRICT**

YOU CAN'T LEARN WELL IF YOU'RE WORRIED ABOUT LIFE'S BASIC NEEDS. CORNELL SCHOOL DISTRICT IS MEETING THOSE NEEDS HEAD-ON

S

So many things can interrupt academic creativity, with anxiety often topping the list. Students who are worried about other parts of their lives —

what's happening at home, where their next meal is coming from, whether they have a coat and hat in the winter — can't just leave those trepidations at the school door.

For the Cornell School District, a small, lower-income district that straddles the Ohio River downstream from downtown Pittsburgh, this is a central theme — and something administrators are determined to tackle. They're at work clearing the obstacles that students face so they can do exactly what they're supposed to be doing at school: focus on learning.

"We know you can break the cycle," says Superintendent Aaron Thomas, an unrepentant optimist. "We're constantly trying to crack that piece."

Across disciplines, district officials have identified several areas where it can add value — and they're digging in. They include:

- **Taking care of clothing needs.** Through Little Learning Science Bets funding, they have outfitted "Cornell's Closet" with racks and bins full of clothing and even personal hygiene products. "We have a lot of kids who need us to provide those things — shoes, jackets, hats," Thomas says. "They can go in and grab what they need." And students aren't required to say why they're going there or what they need; they can simply go.
- **Helping kids with challenges interact with the larger school population.** Consider the "Cornell Coffee Club," overseen by two teachers. Students with significant disabilities work on this in-school coffee counter, which is open weekly. Each Thursday, people can place orders and the kids fill them. "It's a great activity for these students," Thomas says. "They feel like a meaningful part of the community and are gaining skills."
- **Making "wellness rooms" available.** Using grant money, Cornell has worked with a family services organization to create a space where staff can receive students, focus on wellness, and help young people avoid burnout.
- **Thinking about the future.** Teachers are engaging with students on how they might leave their mark on future generations at their school — and putting money behind it. "We're saying to the kids, 'Hey, with X dollars, what can you leave with these younger students to help them and create momentum for other kids to do their own legacy projects, and grow and expand on what you did?'" Thomas says.

Each effort is flourishing, and doing two key things in the process: helping the kids and helping administrators and teachers to better know and understand the kids they're mentoring.

STUDENTS HELPING STUDENTS, TEACHERS HELPING STUDENTS

One day just before Christmas, special education supervisor Carla Antoniades was on lunch duty when a little boy came up to her. She didn't know this kindergartener, but what he said — and how he said it — left her astonished. He needed, he said, to go to the wellness room and talk to the teacher there.

CONTINUED

"He said, 'You know, Miss Carla, I'm just not feeling right. I really need to go see Mr. Jake,'" recalls Antoniades. "And I said, 'Really? What do you do when you go there?' He's like, 'I go there and I just breeeeaaathe.' I couldn't believe a 5-year-old kid said this. He was so comfortable talking about his emotions."

This typifies the environment that Cornell leaders are trying to create — one where staff and teachers meet the kids where they are, but also teach young people to identify their needs, approach adults, and speak up. That's particularly true when they have stressors that the school may know nothing about.

"We forget that we have kids coming to school who have already taken care of siblings, made sure their siblings dressed themselves, before they walk into their first class in the morning. Maybe the parent is already at work. School is not always the first thing on their minds," Antoniades says. "We wanted a space for the kids to come in and be able to decompress if they have things going on in the morning or if something's going on in their life that they need help with."

"We wanted a space for the kids to come in and be able to decompress if they have things going on in the morning or if something's going on in their life that they need help with."

Cornell is part of the Western Pennsylvania Learning 2025 Alliance, a regional cohort of school districts working together — with support from The Grable Foundation — to create student-centered, equity-focused, future-driven schools. Led by local superintendents and AASA, The School Superintendents Association, the Alliance convenes to help member districts like Cornell innovate in ways that will create a better world for their students.

That ethos of bettering kids' lives transcends the wellness rooms and even the classrooms at Cornell. In the halls of the schools, walls are draped with posters encouraging kids and teaching them things like how to make good choices. For administrators and teachers, these messages are designed to reinforce what is being said at home — and to fill in when the message might be lacking.

In many places, including Cornell, the emotional-management piece of education is referred to as social-emotional learning. But for students at Cornell, it's more than an education. It can be a lifeline — one that, in the best cases, gets the stress of the world out of the way so that real learning and creativity can begin.

"It's a balance," says Thomas, the superintendent. "We consider these basic needs that we need to help fulfill. And at the same time, we still need to push them academically. We need to be empathetic and caring, but we also need to balance that with, 'You need to understand this and know this and have a plan when you leave here to be successful.'"

