



IN THE CRAWFORD CENTRAL SCHOOL DISTRICT, ENLISTING — AND SUPPORTING — ALLIES IN STUDENTS' LEARNING

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Wally Mason retired from his classroom, but not from his community.

After a career spent teaching children, he turned to volunteering

and nonprofits near Meadville, Pennsylvania. "One thing I learned in that work," he says, "is that there are many people in our community who struggle with reading. So I thought, 'Well, I'm a former teacher. Maybe I can do something.'"

Mason and his colleagues offered help for parents and caregivers — the adults who, properly equipped, would be able to read to young learners at home. But there was just one problem: No one showed up for help.

"In retrospect, I can't blame them," says Mason. "It's really, really tough for adults to say, 'I struggle with reading.' You get good at hiding it after a while. And to come in and ask for help — well, that's really embarrassing and a difficult thing to do."

Ever the educator, Mason had an idea. "I said, 'You know, maybe

we should work directly with the schools. If we can work with students who are struggling, we can help prevent [literacy] problems while the kids are still young.'"

That's how he found himself at the Crawford Central School District — the same district from which he'd retired.

His timing couldn't have been better. In the decade since he'd retired, Crawford Central had joined 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 districts like Crawford Central do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

"It's been a tremendous opportunity for us to collaborate with other districts," says Tom Washington, Crawford Central's superintendent. "Together, we've been able to ask: How do we not only get education

up and running again [after the pandemic], but also make our schools even better than they were before?"

The answer, in Crawford Central, turned out to be family and community engagement. A key pillar of the district's strategic plan, Crawford Central's focus on families has paved the way for unprecedented partnerships with parents, caregivers, and community members, many of whom are — like Wally Mason — willing and eager to support the district's students.

With help from Ann Noonan, the district's director of technology integration and community outreach, Crawford Central has systematically eliminated the barriers that had kept families out of schools. They created a one-stop shop where parents and caregivers could obtain required clearances, tuberculosis tests, and more. The district even covered families' costs, ensuring that anyone who wanted to help would be able to do so.

Then, says Washington, "we took what we learned from working with families and we applied it to working

