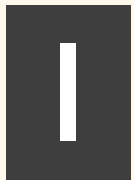




IN THE DUQUESNE CITY SCHOOL DISTRICT, STUDENTS' SOCIAL SKILLS ARE IN A CLASS OF THEIR OWN



It's been a while since anyone's worn the regalia stored in the Duquesne City School District's office.

In 2007, shuttering steel mills and plunging enrollment led the district's high school to close. Since then, the community's kids have had to go elsewhere to graduate — and no student has donned the red cap and gown of the Duquesne Dukes.

Amid the turmoil that followed, Principal Eric Harper noted a growing need for social-emotional support. "The ability to recognize emotions, to know what to do with them, and how to communicate them — that's especially important when you have students who've experienced trauma," he says.

It's a common story in school districts across the country. Nationally, some 90 percent of educators say developing students' social-emotional skills is among the most important things a school can do, affecting everything from academic performance to motivation to students' readiness for life. Yet less than half of teachers have adequate time to actually *teach*

those skills. A third don't have any time at all.

Duquesne City's leaders are determined to rewrite the story. Harper, his colleagues, and Superintendent Sue Mariani are walking the walk when it comes to the skills that matter most, making social-emotional learning as core to the student experience as instruction in reading in math.

In fact, in Duquesne City, social-emotional learning is a class of its own — one that every aspiring Duke now gets to attend.

"One of the things we realized in the wake of COVID was that lots of students — especially the quieter ones — weren't getting the supports they needed," says Mariani. "So we decided to create a dedicated class, and to make sure it was staffed by people with the right training and a sole focus on meeting those social-emotional needs."

Taught by the district's school psychologist and school counselor, the class helps students identify and express emotions in themselves and others, giving kids opportunities to practice healthy, constructive conversations.

"We adults sometimes take those abilities for granted," says Mariani. "We forget that they're not automatic. With young people, you actually have to be intentional and teach them."

To that end, Duquesne City also hired a mental and behavioral health coordinator. Having a dedicated team of social-emotional professionals has been a win-win, officials say: It's brought social-emotional support to every student while also freeing classroom teachers to focus on curriculum and instruction.

The effort has put Duquesne City at the forefront of how school districts are meeting modern students' needs. And they aren't alone: The district 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 districts like Duquesne City do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

“To collaborate with like-minded, forward-thinking peers — all of whom are doing fantastic things in their districts that we can go see and learn from and tweak — that’s been invaluable to us,” says Mariani. The Alliance “has afforded us the ability to try new things and to put some of these crazy ideas into motion.”

Today, that motion is palpable. Thanks to the district’s commitment to social-emotional learning, “students advocate for themselves now,” says Jamie Schmidt, Duquesne City’s director of curriculum and instruction. “They articulate the things they’re going through. And they advocate for each other, too: They can come to a trusted adult and say, ‘Hey, so-and-so is having a really rough day today. Here’s what happened.’”

The culture of care is also spreading to families. Through a suite of events focused on parents and caregivers — including virtual Parent Cafes and in-person Parent Learning Labs,

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where families discover strategies for social-emotional learning at home — the district has added additional layers of support for kids and adults alike.

“Families are thanking us,” says Mariani. “They’re saying, ‘Thank you so much for helping me help my kid. Thank you for giving us strategies.’ They’re really excited about where things are headed.”

So is Eric Harper. After more than a decade in the district, his position has come full circle. Not only has he watched social-emotional learning come to the fore, he’s also laying the groundwork for a future

Duquesne City high school — a place that officials hope will one day offer students a path to graduation without having to leave the district.

“I know how much pride this community has,” he says, “and being able to help restore that pride is priceless. To be able to pull out that red cap and gown again — and to know the kids who’ll be graduating have the skills they need to be successful — I really can’t wait for that day to come.”

