



NURTURING PURPOSE, PASSION, CARE, AND COMMUNITY IN THE FOX CHAPEL AREA SCHOOL DISTRICT

It's not unusual to see students skipping and hopping down an elementary school hallway.

It's less common to see a superintendent doing the same.

But here in the Fox Chapel Area School District, Mary Catherine Reljac joins in on the fun, hopscotching through Fairview Elementary School. The superintendent leaps and ducks, doing whatever the decals plastered on the floor tell kids and adults to do.

"Essentially, the decals tell you to hop here, jump there," Reljac explains. "The point is to give your brain a break and get your body moving as you transition from class to class."

It's a deceptively simple idea — one that, in addition to just being fun — serves a loftier goal. Like everything else in the district, the hallway decals develop the four "pillars" of Fox Chapel Area's success: purpose, passion, care, and community.

The pillars emerged from a community-wide visioning process. "Our school board invited community leaders, business people, and neighbors who just really care about the district," says Reljac. "We invited parents, too — and also volunteers, the PTOs, the Rotary Club, staff, and students themselves. We even put ads in the newspaper. We said to the community, 'We want to hear from you. When you think about the future of Fox Chapel Area, what matters most? What's most important?'"

Over the course of six months, three committees and eight focus groups discussed their answers, sharing ideas and feedback in a co-created Google Doc. Eventually, the focus groups honed in on four pillars that could uplift students and the Fox Chapel Area community alike.

The first pillar, **purpose**, refers to the district's core mission: equipping every student with a world-class education. The second, **passion**, refers to what makes each student tick. "Passion is why you come to school in the morning, whether it's your love of science or music or

community service," says Reljac. "Whatever it is, we're here to help you find it and pursue it."

The district's third pillar, **care**, refers to care for self and others in both body and mind. And the fourth, **community**, refers to stewardship of students' classroom communities, school communities, and communities beyond the district's walls.

Today, these pillars serve as guideposts for every district staff member, from teachers and counselors to custodians and cafeteria workers. Those hallway decals at Fairview Elementary? "That's a care strategy," Reljac explains. "We know that by sparking some joy and caring for children's physical and mental well-being, we're also supporting learning — the district's core purpose."

Other strategies abound. Every school in the district, for example, is now equipped with a Zen Den: a calming, comfortable space designed to care for students' mental health needs. In middle school, an afternoon of service on Martin Luther King Jr. Day calls

students to tackle the community problems they're most passionate about, from food insecurity to local conservation. Students spruce up trails, take soup to neighbors in need, and make care packages for first responders. One group even makes goat treats for Allegheny Goatscape, which uses goats to keep grass and vegetation in check.

Every project is chosen by teachers and students, and is supported by parents, teachers, and neighbors. None cost any district dollars.

Fox Chapel Area's commitment to purpose, passion, care, and community led it to join 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 Fox Chapel Area do what they do best: maximize learning, achievement, and growth through a focus on educating the whole student.

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propelled us forward in lots of different ways as a school district and as a region," says Reljac. Staff from the participating districts are "in and out of each others' schools so much more regularly. We're leaning on each other and learning from each other. Our goal here at Fox Chapel Area is to throw open our doors and be a beacon on the hill for anyone who needs it — and also to go out and learn from all the other beacons on all the other hills."

It's a collaborative spirit that's filtered down to Fox Chapel Area's students. The district's high school, for example, recently revamped its governance structure in ways that reflect the Alliance. Its various leadership groups — the Class Council, A.W. Beattie Career Center representatives, Student Engagement Team, Diversity Council, Wellness Council, Community Outreach, and Social Team — launched the newly formed Fox Leadership Council as a way to

bring their voices together.

The result, says Reljac, is not only a more cohesive student body, but also a wellspring of student-led efforts to nurture the four pillars.

One of the things representing the spirit of the collaborative Fox Leadership Council was a joint Halloween dance with Best Buddies — a club that builds friendships with students with special needs — and the National Honor Society and the Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Council. "It was a beautiful event," she says, "that really showed what purpose, passion, care, and community can look like.

"It showed what the Fox Chapel Area School District, at its best, can be."

