



HIGHLANDS SCHOOL DISTRICT IS MEETING STUDENTS AND FAMILIES WHERE THEY ARE (AND THAT'S NO METAPHOR)

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The challenges are big. The obstacles are formidable. But when it comes to connecting with parents and truly supporting students,

Highlands School District is heading down the road to success. Quite literally.

In a district where 64 percent of families are classified as socioeconomically disadvantaged, and where two large Section Eight housing units are located, Highlands is committed to meeting families where they are — and traveling directly to them to accomplish that.

After receiving grant money through Allegheny County, Highlands partnered with a local company, ABC Transit, to create what they call the “Rams Van,” painted and named for the district’s mascot, the Golden Ram. Now, families who want to interact with the schools their children attend — but who may not have any way of getting there — have an option. In effect, it’s a school administrative office on wheels.

The van’s interior is outfitted with a desk and a computer with WiFi. This summer, the van will visit neighborhoods, including the

Section Eight housing and park, so that school staff can help parents enroll incoming kindergarteners and transfer students.

The Rams Van will also deliver donated clothing and hygiene products, and even backpacks stuffed with goodies for students of all ages. Repairing and delivering of school devices is also on the table — or aboard the bus, as it were.

It’s a creative solution dreamed up in a district that’s determined to elevate students’ lives.

Highlands 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 Highlands do what they do best: help kids build the brightest possible future.

One key to building that thriving future, says Superintendent Monique Mawhinney, is connecting with students’ families.

“A lot of times, it’s really hard to get parent involvement because a lot of our parents don’t have

transportation or they only have one vehicle. So they struggle getting to the meetings that we need them here for,” Mawhinney says. “And typically, these are kids whose attendance is really bad, or they have some significant behavioral issues. So we really were trying to find a way to expand our community outreach and focus on those families who just can’t get to us.”

Along with the Rams Van, Highlands is offering community outreach through the “Rams Dens” that have opened in each school building, which provide donated clothing, toiletries, and other necessities. Kids can go there before or after school, and in the high school they can drop by during study halls to take items they need.

And if kids can’t come in, or they feel uncomfortable?

“We know a lot of times kids may be embarrassed or they don’t want to tell us what they need. So we want to expand out into the community,” Mawhinney says. “We will take this stuff to them.”

THE LUNCH CLUB

Mawhinney is meeting kids and parents where they are. Or where she is. Or both.

She keeps two drawers full of snacks in her office, which is connected to the high school. Emails pop up regularly from kids asking, "Hey, can I come down to get a snack?" (Her answer: Yes, but not as an excuse to slip out of class.)

And you can hear her enthusiasm when she talks about what's begun happening at lunchtime. A group of kids now routinely drop by to have their meal in her office, rather than the cafeteria.

They aren't the athletic stars or the kids who have banked on being valedictorian since middle school. They're simply teenagers who know they're welcome in their district's superintendent's workspace. They know that as busy as she is, she'll make time to hear what's on their minds and what's new in their lives.

They know they matter.

Add these initiatives together and look at it through a longer lens. It becomes clear: These efforts touch on education, community, and overall child well-being. They're using the school as a

conscious tool to stitch together the neighborhoods that make up the district — and showing every student that they're not just cogs in some education machine.

These moments of community connection were visible during the recent launch of the Rams Van, which was unveiled at Harvest Moon, a coffee shop owned by a district parent. Predictably, people loved it.

"People who understand this area know that it's such a need," Mawhinney says, and Highlands is making sure to meet that need.

It all comes back to the philosophy at Highlands, where the community and its needs are helping to shape the contours of the educational system of today and tomorrow.

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