



FROM ROTE TO REVOLUTIONARY: AT KEYSTONE OAKS, EDUCATION THAT DEVELOPS SKILLS FOR THE FUTURE TAKES CENTER STAGE

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For decades, the staples of school were basic and straightforward. Memorization. Recitation. The ability to execute algebra

equations or understand chemical formulas. Dissect a frog. Map a sentence. Take a test. Get a grade.

No longer. School today is about skills and developing critical thinking as much as it is about memorizing material. Expectations are changing as fast as the world and the workforce are evolving. If you can't navigate the landscape, life after graduation is going to be a challenge.

That reality is front-and-center these days at Keystone Oaks School District, where administrators know that success and strength lie in helping students understand the swirl of changes in the culture and the working world that awaits them.

"There's been a huge generational shift from when I was a kid, and what my parents were concerned about or thought about, to how kids can access and process information," says Sarah Welch, the district's communications director. "Their worlds are so different today."

Fortunately, education is different today, too. Keystone Oaks realizes, for example, that students are more engaged with learning when they have a project or a purpose — or they're part of a group that's executing something meaningful. That's why the district encourages a student-run business that produces goods sold at the annual Handmade Arcade craft fair and the Home & Garden Show in Downtown Pittsburgh.

When students associate school with creating things they care about, that's a potent motivator. "When they have activities like that, they are more engaged," Welch says, "and they're more likely to be here."

SEEING THE FUTURE MORE CLEARLY

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 Keystone Oaks innovate in ways that will give students the skills they truly need.

This focus on skills at Keystone Oaks is having a clear impact on the 2023-24 freshman class, if Anthony Cerminara's experience is any indication. The ninth grader is augmenting his regular schedule with online classes that allow him to chase his passions — and build his abilities and confidence along the way.

He's busy working on a weather balloon and he will compete in an upcoming engineering competition using a rover he built with guidance from his teacher, Andrew Bochicchio.

Anthony is planning to study aerospace engineering. Listen to him describe his project and you'll get a clear sense of what 21st-century skill-building means at Keystone Oaks.

"Basically, the challenge is you have to use the rover to move across the gym floor and then pick up certain materials," he says. "I think it's no more than one pound heavy and five feet off the ground. So, that's kind of just like the basic base. It's going to be powered by batteries with motors, and then we're going to have a kind of a fishing rod-like system for the arm. So that's exciting."

This is clearly not your grandparents' high school experience.

As the gifted support teacher, Bochicchio has 42 kids on his roster. He has noticed that among them, the current juniors and seniors — those who experienced the effects of the pandemic in their middle school years — are hungry for the second half of their high-school experience to be as interactive as possible.

"They missed that day-to-day social interaction in a traditional classroom setting," Bochicchio says.

But sophomores and freshmen like Anthony have a powerful desire to work independently, and many embrace the kinds of online classes that Anthony uses to augment his core curriculum. He loves that Keystone Oaks is making this possible.

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The emphasis on creative scheduling and skill development pays dividends in another area, too: that of mapping students' post-high school plans. Whether teens are considering college or a trade or something else, if students can try before they buy when it comes to a potential career path, they will make more informed choices — and avoid investing in a path that doesn't suit them.

"We can connect kids with so many resources we hadn't considered before," Bochicchio says.

And in the end, that's what it's all about. Education isn't just knowing things — it's knowing where to find things, knowing who can help you succeed, and knowing and understanding the landscape you're navigating. That way, when unexpected road closures happen — as they so often do in life — you're equipped to reroute your internal GPS and find another route to success.

