



# AT NEW BRIGHTON HIGH SCHOOL, AN OLD LIBRARY BECOMES A HUB OF INNOVATION AND FRESH THINKING

**T**he library nestled between classrooms on New Brighton High School's third floor is still, in many ways, the same physical space it was in 1972, to hear Superintendent Joe Guarino tell it.

But this library has taken on a surprising new life — much to the benefit of the students who use it. That's thanks to the librarian, Krista Berger.

Berger pared down and curated the collection of books (don't worry, there are still several thousand) and used the space to create "all these little niches" — tables full of games and puzzles, a chill-and-read corner, an area to listen to music and use technology.

The high school library is now a bustling fulcrum of activity — and innovation. That's no small thing in an era when education and learning are taking on new meaning and requiring new skills with each passing day.

Innovation is top of mind these days at New Brighton. 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 New Brighton do what they do best: prepare every learner for tomorrow.

For Berger, this notion of preparing kids for the future taps into her own personal goal — to elevate kids by giving them valuable tools and the guidance to use them.

"There's some connection between empowering kids with spaces where they're involved in meaningful work and improving disciplinary numbers," she says. "If we could just figure out more ways to get kids in school actively involved in something that is meaningful to them, that's how we unlock the discipline."

Berger, who became librarian three years ago after a stint as a substitute teacher, has taken the innovation a step further with her creation of a team of library aides at the high school and middle school — a venture that has rippled far beyond the libraries itself.

Right down to the application and interview process, the positions are styled like real-world jobs. The team of aides at the high school has grown to 30 students, with more clamoring to join. Skills taught to the aides include executive function (sorting books), organizational skills (library clerking), and social interaction (helping other students learn to use the library effectively).

"What I love most about my kids is that they are all so different — so, so different in ability levels, race, background, gender, LGBTQ, non-LGBTQ," she says. "But they all will come together and work together for a common goal. And that inspires the other kids to see that is possible."

## STUDENTS HELPING STUDENTS

New Brighton student and library aide Viki Huang moved to the United States from China when she was younger, and her parents had a restaurant. Recently, that helped her connect with a new student from Thailand, whose parents also ran a restaurant.

The Thai student arrived knowing no one. No other student spoke Thai. But he has found a home at the

library, making friends with students like Viki. He plays chess there. He talks with Berger through Google Translate. He has, Berger says, found a safe space where he can grow and open up.

“It is a quiet space where I get to meet a lot of people who go to our school without feeling overwhelmed,” Viki says. “And it’s a great way to make new friends because there are just different groups of people who come in and then we are able to help them and learn more about them through their interests in books.”

Another student credits the library with changing her experience of high school.

When she transferred to New Brighton, this high schooler “was a ball of anxiety,” she says. But in the library, “I’ve opened up a lot more, like to be my own person. And I also get to paint on the walls and I do a lot of art up there, and that brought people in to read more of the [popular YA author] Natasha Preston books.”

Berger had invited the teen to paint a mural full of images related to

Preston’s book series, then posted photos of the murals on social media. Preston quickly posted an encouraging reply. It was incredibly encouraging for the student: “I got so excited,” she says. “It was, like, a very big moment.”

This library has grown into a gathering place where kids who might feel on the margins of high-school life can go and find a book, some help, perhaps even a kindred spirit.

“Sometimes it’s the gym, or for some kids it’s the football field or the band room and the choir room or the stage,” Berger says. “But for so many of our kids, the library is that place for them. It’s the home for them, and I just feel truly so blessed to be able to build that with them.”

She adds: “When kids come in and they say ‘I hate reading, books aren’t for me,’ I can tell them: Libraries are not for book people. Libraries are for people. If we can just kind of demystify libraries — not only for our kids but also for the community and their families — we can build some pretty amazing spaces.”

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